

Vajpayee's health no cause for concern: BJP

NEW DELHI, Sept 1: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's health problems, which have forced him to reschedule his United States trip, are not serious, the head of his party said today, reports AFP.

BJP president Bangaru Lakshman told foreign journalists that Vajpayee's ailments were due to his age and were not grave.

"At this age minor problems are there and only when they became unbearable he was advised rest. There is no cause for concern," he said.

Vajpayee rested at home Monday, a day after he was forced to cut short his stay at his BJP party's national convention and return to Delhi for health reasons.

Officially, Vajpayee returned from the BJP meeting in the central city of Nagpur because of aggravated pain in his knee joints caused by osteoarthritis.

The prime minister delayed his visit to the United States next week by two days for the same reason.

Three months ago he was laid low by a throat infection, and speculation over the 73-year-old's health was fuelled by a rather fragile performance at Independence Day celebrations on August 15.

Lakshman denied the premier's health was causing concern in the BJP.

Bomb explodes outside Pak consulate in Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, Sept 1: A powerful bomb exploded Friday outside the Pakistani consulate in Afghanistan's eastern city of Jalalabad, Taliban officials said, reports AP.

There were no injuries and so far there have been no arrests. The explosion damaged the boundary wall, said Mohammed Hakim.

The explosion is the third attack in as many months against Pakistani sites in Afghanistan. The other attacks have occurred in the Afghan capital of Kabul.

No one has claimed responsibility for the explosions, but Taliban authorities blame opposition troops led by ousted President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his former military chief Ahmed Shah Massoud.

The anti-Taliban alliance accuses Pakistan of bankrolling the Taliban and sending troops into Afghanistan to wage war against opposition troops.

Islamabad has flatly denied the accusation.

The Taliban, in turn, accuse Iran, several Central Asian states and Russia of aiding the opposition.

The United Nations has repeatedly asked all of Afghanistan's neighbours to stop its assistance to the warring factions, but so far there are no signs that aid is dwindling to either side in the protracted war.

Fighting in northern Afghanistan has raged for several months.

Philippine rebels demand \$10m for release of American hostage

ZAMBOANGA, Sept 1: Muslim rebels have demanded 10 million dollars for the release of an American kidnapped this week in the southern Philippines despite a US refusal to pay any ransom, negotiators said today, reports AP.

"The Abu Sayyaf rebels, who earlier threatened to behead Jeffrey Schilling, pledged not to harm him while negotiations continue. They asked that American food and medicine be sent quickly for the 24-year-old resident of Oakland, California, who has serious health problems according to US officials."

"You must send today medicine and food because you know this American doesn't eat cassava," rebel spokesman Abu Sabaya told newly appointed government negotiator Roland Sarmiento.

The two spoke in a telephone conversation broadcast over the Radio Mindanao Network.

Sabaya did not mention the ransom demand or make any other new formal demands in the conversation, although he had earlier said the group would present its demands on Friday.

The rebels are expected to seek the release of several Arab terrorists being held in US jails.

The US State Department has ruled out paying ransom or making any deals with the rebels and has said the negotiations are the Philippine government's responsibility.

The Abu Sayyaf group is still holding six other foreigners and 12 Filipinos after freeing six Westerners earlier this week for a reported \$6 million bankrolled by Libya.

On Thursday night, Sabaya contacted a negotiator who worked for the release of the earlier hostages and made the 10 million dollar ransom demand, a member of the negotiating team said.

He had earlier said that "one American is worth 10 Europeans" in terms of ransom.

Musharraf reshuffles top brass in Pak army

ISLAMABAD, Sept 1: Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has reshuffled the army top brass for the first time since the October coup, in a move aimed at asserting his control, analysts said today, reports AFP.

Musharraf replaced the chairman of the anti-corruption National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and appointed a new Chief of General Staff (CGS) in a series of changes ordered late Thursday.

Lieutenant General Muhammad Yusuf Khan, Commander Strike Corps, Multan, has been appointed as CGS, a statement by the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) directorate said.

He replaced Lieutenant General Muhammad Aziz Khan who will take over as Corps Commander, Lahore, it said.

CGS is the second most important slot after the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), which is held by Musharraf himself in addition to the office of the country's chief executive.

The changes which affected some of the architects of the October 12 coup has quelled speculation that they were "calling the shots and not Musharraf himself," said analyst Mak Lodhi.

"With the changes made and others in the offing, the chief executive is going to strengthen his flanks," he added.

Musharraf also named Lieutenant General Khalid Maqbool as NAB chairman, replacing Lieutenant General Syed Mohammad Amjad who was assigned the job of Corps Commander of Multan, the ISPR statement said.

Lieutenant General Tahir Ali Qureshi, Corps Commander Bahawalpur, has been shifted to the General Headquarters Rawalpindi as Inspector General Training and Evaluation, it said.

Musharraf also promoted Major General Munir Hafeez and Major General Javed Hassan to the rank of Lieutenant General.

Hafeez will take over as Corps Commander Bahawalpur while

Hassan has been appointed Commandant National Defence College.

Military sources said the reshuffle was necessary as five generals were due for retirement in coming weeks.

However, the changes have attracted wide attention in the press as some of the generals, particularly Aziz had played "crucial role" in ousting former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Aziz had refused to accept the orders of General Khawaja Ziauddin who Sharif named as army chief in place of Musharraf while he was on way to Karachi from Colombo, on October 12.

"The refusal by Aziz had sealed the fate of Nawaz Sharif and ensured General Musharraf's safe return home and his subsequent assumption of power," The Nation daily said.

The transfers taking place on the eve of the military ruler's visit to New York "will convince all and sundry that General Musharraf is

not a mere executor of policies devised by others, as has been claimed by some of his detractors," it observed.

"It would prove beyond any doubt that the COAS is in full control of the army high command." The transfer of NAB chairman comes amid criticism from politicians that it was being used as an instrument to "victimise" politicians rather than rooting out corruption.

The General has established 17 new courts to stem criticism of a slow pace process of accountability. NAB courts have already sentenced several previous government leaders and politicians including Sharif for corruption and disqualified him from holding public office for 21 years.

NAB's policies and action against businessmen had also come under attack.

Its new chairman is likely to shape NAB as a "more business friendly accountability bureau," The News said.

Air pollution causes 6 pc of deaths in Europe

PARIS, Sept 1: Europe's love affair with the car costs tens of thousands of deaths from air pollution each year and carries an astronomical economic price, according to research published Saturday in The Lancet, the British medical weekly, reports AFP.

Epidemiologists trawled through mortality statistics in Austria, France and Switzerland and compared them to documented incidence of chronic respiratory and heart problems and exposure to airborne particles.

They found that more than 40,000 deaths per year in these countries could be attributed to air pollution, equal to six per cent of all deaths.

Road traffic was to blame for half of all these deaths, as well as more than 300,000 cases of bronchitis, half a million asthma attacks and more than 16 million days of lost work and restricted activities, they said.

The economic price is just as high. Health costs from air pollution amounts to 1.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), according to their calculations.

"Although individual health risks of air pollution are relatively small, the public-health consequences are considerable," warns the team, led by Nino Kuenzli of the Institute for Social and Preventive Medicine at Basel University.

"Traffic-related air pollution remains a key target for public-health action in Europe."

The figures do not take into account deaths, injuries and economic costs resulting from road accidents.

In a commentary, health experts Stephanie London and

Isabelle Romieu said the estimates were conservative, given that new research points to a link between diesel engines -- which are increasingly popular in Europe -- and asthma.

Austria, France and Switzerland are advanced economies with tough controls on car exhausts. Environmental controls are far more lax in developing countries.

A study of 331,000 Taiwanese students last year blamed rising incidence of childhood asthma on traffic-related air pollution.

British MP becomes human guinea pig for AIDS vaccine

LONDON, Sept 1: A British member of parliament on Thursday became the first human guinea pig for a vaccine against the deadly AIDS virus which scientists hope could eventually save millions of lives, reports AFP.

Dr Evan Harris, a former family doctor, was the first of 20 British volunteers who will be injected with the vaccine to test if it creates immunity to the disease.

But researchers have cautioned that it will be at least ten years before the vaccine can be widely used to help prevent the deadly virus.

The trial is being conducted by the Human Immunology Unit of Britain's Medical Research Council.

Scientists working there hope the vaccine will stimulate the body to produce T-cells which will destroy cells infected by HIV -- the virus that leads to AIDS -- fast enough to stop an infection from taking hold.

If the first phase of the clinical trials is successful, they plan to repeat them in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, in six months' time.

The Human Immunology Unit's trial is one of several being carried out by AIDS researchers around the world, but is thought to be the first vaccine actually tested on humans.

The British vaccine is the first which is specifically designed to target the A-strain HIV-1 virus, the most prevalent strain in Africa where the disease is at its most rampant and threatens to wipe out large sections of the population.

Harris, an MP with the opposition Liberal Democrat Party, volunteered to take part in the trials and was accepted after rigorous screening.

"I am confident the vaccine is safe and that it will prime the immune system to be able to protect against HIV infection," he said.



An activist of the Congress (I) Party is dragged away by policewomen during a demonstration in downtown Delhi yesterday. Hundreds of activists took to the street to protest against water and electricity shortages in the capital. -- AFP photo

Lankan air force vehicle attacked: 14 killed

COLOMBO, Sept 1: Tamil Tiger rebels exploded Claymore mines north of Colombo and beyond it, the rebels control most of the territory, except for the town of Jaffna.

The tractor, carrying 21 air force men from a camp to an air base 15 kilometres away, was passing a school when the Claymore mines exploded, said defence ministry spokesman Sanath Karunaratne. He said 13 men died on the spot and one died later of his injuries.

He blamed the rebels, who have been known to use such mines in attacks on the military during the 17-year war for a separate homeland for the Tamil minority.

There are few buses in the northern parts of the country where much of the fighting takes place. The military often uses tractors to transport men and material.

The rebels' Claymore mines are usually electrically fired with a remote control. The mines contain steel fragments that are discharged in a predetermined direction.

Amnesty said in a letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunga that many people in the Vavuniya area have been held in secret detention and tortured for up to three weeks, and a total of nine have disappeared this year.

This deterioration in the human rights situation appears to be linked to attacks on army camps and convoys, apparently carried out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," said Amnesty, the London-based human rights watchdog group.

Government spokesman Ariya Rubasinghe said of the Amnesty report, "There is no truth whatsoever. It is totally false."

"The present security situation in the country and the terrorism by the LTTE do force us to take precautions. Our forces do question people, but to say that they disappear is indeed a false statement," Rubasinghe said.

Amnesty said the disappearances "have taken place in the context of a general deterioration in human rights, following the introduction of emergency regulations in May."

The regulations allow the military and police to detain people indefinitely without bringing them to trial.

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Chief of United Nations Administrator in East Timor Sergio de Mello (2R) introduces the members of delegations to Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid (2L) at the presidential palace in Jakarta yesterday, while Indonesian Foreign Affairs Minister Alwi Shihab (L) looks on. Mello warned that pro-Indonesia militia were getting stronger in the border areas and that unless they were disbanded, efforts to repatriate and resettle refugees there would collapse. --AFP photo

Suharto trial must proceed: Wahid

JAKARTA, Sept 1: President Abdurrahman Wahid insisted today that the unprecedented corruption trial of ex-dictator Suharto must proceed even though the former leader has failed to show up in court on the grounds of poor health, reports AP.

In an apparent bid to persuade him to cooperate with prosecutors, Wahid repeated an earlier promise of clemency if Suharto returns any ill-gotten wealth.

"The trial must go on," Wahid said. "The judge will rule whether he is innocent or not."

Suharto, 79, failed Thursday to attend the opening of the trial, which is regarded as key to Wahid's promises to clean up endemic corruption.

Suharto is charged with taking

583 million dollar in state funds to bankroll massive business empires for his children and cronies.

He could be imprisoned for life if convicted. He has denied any wrongdoing or that he has stashed a fortune away in foreign bank accounts.

The doctors said his brain has been damaged by three strokes and they warned he might have another if forced to endure a lengthy trial.

He also has diabetes as well as kidney and heart problems.

His lawyers said he can not answer questions properly and has trouble remembering details.

A five-judge panel adjourned the trial until Sept. 14 after prosecutors said they wanted an independent medical team to assess

Suharto's condition.

"If proven guilty, Suharto must be punished. But the president will pardon him on condition he returns all of the wealth he illegally collected during his presidency," Wahid said.

Suharto ruled the world's fourth most populous nation for 32 years before student protests and riots forced him to quit in disgrace in May 1998.

His failure to take part in the trial has cast doubt on whether he will ever face justice.

Anti-Suharto activists complain that the charges against him are too narrow.

They maintain that he stole billions of dollars of state funds and that he should also be charged with human rights violations.

Moscow to push for joint N-venture with Japan

MOSCOW, Sept 1: Russia will use President Vladimir Putin's visit to Japan, which begins Sunday, to press for a joint venture to build nuclear power plants in the country's far east, Interfax cited government sources saying today, reports AFP.

The details of the plan, originally conceived during the Soviet era, foresees Japanese investment in the plants' construction in return for subsequent exports of energy to Japan, a source in the Russian atomic energy ministry told the agency.

The joint venture would enable Russia to meet chronic energy shortages in eastern Siberia and the far east, while Japan is looking "with interest" at the possibility of importing Russian energy, according to the sources.

Russia's atomic energy minister, Yevgeny Adamov, and the head of the country's electricity monopoly UES, Anatoly Chubais, are due to accompany Putin on his three-day visit to Japan.

In Tokyo, a newspaper said

today that Russian President Vladimir Putin has underlined his government's backing to Japan's bid to gain a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

"Russia supports Japan's policy to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council," Putin told the Asahi Shimbun.

"We regard Japan as a country with full qualifications to gain the status," Putin said in a written response to questions posed by the newspaper.

Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin had already expressed his support for Japan's permanent membership of the council.

Putin and Obuchi's successor Yoshiro Mori, with whom he will hold three sessions of talks in Tokyo, are to attend the UN Millennium Summit next week in New York.

China, however, has expressed opposition to seeing its major Asian rival join the elite club permanently.

Globalisation triggering instability in parts of Asia

SINGAPORE, Sept 1: Globalisation is triggering instability in parts of Asia, fuelling increased religious fundamentalism and separatist movements, analysts warned in a published report today, says DPA.

Participants at the Asia-Europe Roundtable in Singapore told The Straits Times that rebellions in various countries fuelled by haphazard reforms would thwart attempts by these nations to integrate into a common Asian community.

Abdullah Toha, deputy Chairman of the Central Executive Board of Indonesia's National Mandate Party, said that "certain factions of Islam are very nationalistic". These groups believed there is too much Western influence.

"When governments fail to socialise the gains from globalisation, people become impatient and begin to question the process," he was quoted as saying.

The two-day event which

wrapped up on Thursday attracted delegates from 15 countries.

Jusuf Wanandi, a director at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta, said globalisation "is happening very fast, in a way too quick to absorb and with an all-encompassing impact".

The pressures have prompted religious leaders to speak out against the evils of rampant capitalism, added Karim Raslan, a partner at a Kuala Lumpur-based law firm.

"The role of religion and faith in globalisation has been ignored for too long," he said.

The chief opponent to Philippine President Joseph Estrada's move to make constitutional amendments allowing foreign investors greater control over assets was cardinal Sin, the Catholic archbishop in Manila, Karim, noted.

Recent developments in Malaysia, Pakistan and Indonesian Aceh reflect the growing dominance of Islam, he said.

Storm hits S Korea: 4 killed

SEOUL, Sept 1: At least four people were killed and 21 others missing after a storm hit South Korea with gale-force winds, anti-disaster government officials said Friday, reports AP.

Typhoon Prapiroon weakened to a storm that sank two boats, knocked down power lines and blew away cars as it skirted the western coast of the Korean peninsula overnight, they said.

Three people were killed when they were hit by broken windows and other flying objects, officials said. A fourth was killed when he was blown by winds from a building, they said.

Two boats sank off the west coast, leaving 21 people missing, officials said.

Most of the damage was caused by winds of up to 110 kilometers (58 miles) per hour, officials said. About 8,000 homes in Seoul were left without electricity overnight.

A dike in southern South Korea ruptured, flooding residential areas and vast farmlands, officials said. Nationwide, about 300 people were left homeless, they said.

The storm landed on North Korea's central west coast early Friday. There were no immediate reports of casualties or property damage in the isolated communist country.

BRIEFLY

China launches satellite:

China placed a multi-purpose observation satellite into orbit Friday aboard a Long March 4-B rocket, the official Xinhua News agency reported, AP reports from Beijing.

The rocket carrying the ZY-2 satellite blasted off early in the day from the Taiyuan Launch Center in northern Shanxi province, Xinhua said. The satellite is designed to conduct scientific experiments in space and to gather and send back pictures and other data that can be used to survey land, plan cities, monitor crops, and survey disasters, Xinhua said.

21 hurt in Philippines violence:

At least 21 people were injured in new attacks in a southern Philippine province blamed on Muslim separatist rebels, officials said Friday, AP reports from Philippines.

In the first of the attacks Thursday in North Cotabato province, a bomb exploded during the afternoon rush hour near public market in the town of Kabacan, police said. At least 13 people were injured in the blast. Hours later, a second bomb exploded about 10 kilometers (6 miles) away in Kidapawan city, the provincial capital, police said. One person was injured. Police diffused two more bombs found in Kidapawan's city plaza, police chief Mariano Segovia said.