

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 Laxman 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.

Laxman 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 Massood.

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 dollar 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 many 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 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 Phillipine 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 \$16 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 Lodi.

"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 Defense 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.



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

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 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 percent 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.



Three years after the death of Princess Diana, a woman places flowers at the gates of Kensington Palace in London in memory of Princess Diana on Friday. Approximately three hundred people carrying flowers and cards came to pay their respects to Diana.

-- AFP photo

Moscow to push for joint N-venture with Japan

MOSCOW, Sept 1: Russia will 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.

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.

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

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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

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.

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 Indonesia's Aceh reflect the growing dominance of Islam, he said.

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 that is too quick to absorb and with an all-encompassing impact".

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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 Talyuan Launch Center in northern Shandong 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 Philippines 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.

In Tokyo, a newspaper said