

International

Russian anti-submarine missile sank Kursk

BERLIN, Sept 8: Russia's Kursk nuclear-powered submarine was sent to the bottom of the Barents Sea last month with 118 sailors aboard after being holed by an anti-ship missile fired by a Russian cruiser taking part in exercises, Germany's Berliner Zeitung reported today, reports AFP.

Quoting a report from the FSB, Russia's intelligence service (the ex-KGB), the newspaper said the Kursk was sunk by a radar-guided Granit missile fired by the Kirov class nuclear-powered cruiser Peter the Great during exercises Russia's Northern Fleet was conducting August 12.

The newspaper said the report, and its stunning conclusion, was presented to Russian President Vladimir Putin on August 31.

Up to now, the exact cause of the tragedy has remained a mystery. Moscow initially said it came about because of a collision between the Kursk and another submarine, possibly from a NATO country, but then backed off a little to suggest only that an underwater collision was responsible.

In a statement ahead of its edition, the Berliner Zeitung said the "detailed report" showed the cruiser had fired the missile, which was fitted with a new hunting system.

The missile had ploughed through the water for some 20 km then an underwater explosion was registered aboard the cruiser, followed by another moments later, the report

said. The two explosions would have been seen from the bridge of the cruiser, the newspaper said.

"Aboard the cruiser, they initially thought the second explosion was part of the exercises. The FSB investigating committee wrote in its report that they only dawned on them later that the position of the Kursk and the Granit missile coincided perfectly," at a depth of 400 metres (1,300 feet), the newspaper continued.

It said that the report did not say why exactly the missile hit the Kursk.

But the conclusions are a new blow to the image of Russia's military, it said, adding that Putin was going to keep quiet about the conclusion until his return from the UN Millennium Summit being held in New York. It said he planned to discuss the findings with military chiefs in a meeting excluding the FSB.

The FSB, for its part, has denied any knowledge of the report, the newspaper said.

The Peter the Great had apparently been firing Granit missiles almost daily since August 2, and on August 12, during the Barents Sea exercise, its mission was to test the Granit over short distances in "the most realistic conditions possible," the newspaper said.

The head of the North Fleet, Admiral Vyacheslav Popov, and vice-Admiral Mikhail Mozak were apparently aboard the cruiser when the Kursk went down.

US officials speaking under anonymity have already spoken of two explosions recorded by US submarines in the area when the Kursk went down -- raising the theory that an external explosion caused the Kursk's torpedoes to blow up in the bow of the submarine.

According to a US report, the second explosion, which occurred one minute and 16 seconds after the first, was 45 to 50 times more powerful.

Russian television RTR also said Thursday that the navy would start recovering the bodies of the 118 dead sailors on the Kursk at the beginning of October.

The work will have to be done before the temperatures on the Barents Sea drop too low, said Igor Spasky of the submarine construction agency.

Meanwhile, the head of a US investment bank said his firm, KBZ Investment Inc, would donate 250,000 dollars to relatives of the victims of the disaster, to boost Russian government compensation of 26,000 dollars so far given to each family.

The money -- around 2,100 dollars per family -- will be transferred to the account of the governor of Murmansk, near the submarine's home base, for distribution, said bank president William Zylka.

He said the Russians had been one of among the greatest friends of the United States since the 1943 battle of Stalingrad, when Russian forces captured a Nazi German army at great cost to themselves.



A file photo dated August 18 shows the Russian Navy's heavy A-Cruiser 'Pyotr Velikiy' (Peter the Great) anchoring in position in the area of the rescue operation for the sunken nuclear-powered 'Kursk' submarine in the Barents Sea. According to a news report in the German daily Berliner Zeitung yesterday quoting a report from the FSB, Russia's intelligence service (the ex-KGB), the Kursk was sunk by a radar-guided Granit missile fired by the nuclear-powered 'Peter the Great' during exercises Russia's Northern Fleet was conducting in the area. -- AFP photo

Sharif's lawyer receives death threat

KARACHI, Sept 8: A top Pakistani criminal lawyer today said unknown callers had threatened to kill him for challenging deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif's conviction in a high court here, reports AFP.

"I am getting threatening calls for the past six days," Barrister Azizullah Sheikh told AFP before the court resumed hearing.

"I will get to you soon," the caller says before hanging up without identifying himself, Sheikh, 72, said.

Sheikh was hired by Sharif in his appeal against the April 6 life sentence handed down by an anti-terrorism court in Karachi on charges of hijacking and terrorism. "Every morning when I start my work at around 4.00 am I get a threatening call from an unknown caller," he said.

"It is the responsibility of the government to provide me security because I pay tax in millions."

Gunmen on March 10 shot dead Sharif's main lawyer Iqbal Raadh in his office. The murder led to several days of boycott by Sharif's team of defence lawyers.

Pakistan military ruler General Pervez Musharraf condemned Raadh's murder as an "act of terrorism." Chief prosecutor Raja Qureshi expressed concern over threats to Sheikh and promised security.



Permanent members of the United Nations Security Council meet at a hotel on Thursday in New York. From right are: US President Bill Clinton, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Chinese President Jiang Zemin, French President Jacques Chirac and Russian President Vladimir Putin. -- AFP photo

World leaders pledge to boost UN peacekeeping

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 8: World leaders solemnly pledged yesterday to strengthen United Nations peacekeeping, but a public split over humanitarian intervention raised doubts about the effectiveness of future action, reports Reuters.

Chastened by the United Nation's recent poor record in preventing massacres, a special summit of the 15-member Security Council adopted guidelines intended to support UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's drive to give the world body more teeth.

But while the United States, Britain and Canada sought to extend the grounds for intervention to avert disasters, Russian and Chinese leaders stressed their fierce opposition to interference in countries' internal affairs. The five countries, permanent

members of the council, then met among themselves, and pledged to work towards revitalising peacekeeping operations, including adjusting the scale of payments in light of changed circumstances.

The United States, which owes the world body \$1.7 billion, has argued for changes that it hopes would lower its contribution.

On the second day of a UN Millennium Summit, gloom deepened after Middle East peace prospects after US President Bill Clinton failed to break the deadlock over Jerusalem in separate meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said Clinton remained available to help mediate, but the

two sides had to make the "hard decisions" for peace and time was running short.

Opening the showcase peacekeeping session, Annan told the Security Council it faced a crisis of credibility.

"Too many vulnerable communities in too many regions of the world now hesitate to look to the United Nations to assist them in their hour of need," he said. After recent problems in providing forces for Sierra Leone, East Timor, Congo and the Eritrea-Ethiopia border, Annan called for new measures to overhaul underfunded and understaffed UN peacekeeping operations, with special emphasis on Africa.

Although neither Russian President Vladimir Putin nor Chinese President Jiang Zemin mentioned it by name, NATO's

Kosovo war haunted the debate about intervention.

The US-led alliance launched its bombing campaign against Yugoslavia last year without seeking Security Council approval because it was clear that Moscow, the Serbs' historic ally, would have used its veto to block any action.

Putin said that under no circumstances could the new century "be a cause for reconsidering the norms of behaviour tested by time." Jiang also voiced objections to the idea of bypassing the Council in any way.

The council adopted a resolution that would move toward overhauling peacekeeping operations in order to provide better trained troops that would respond faster to crises.

Number of centenarians hits record high in Japan

TOKYO, Sept 8: A record 13,036 Japanese will be at least 100 years old as of the end of this month, the government said today, reports AP.

The number of people 100 or over will increase by 1,690 from last year's 11,346, the previous record for centenarians, says the Health and Welfare Ministry said. Women make up 10,578, or 83.4 per cent of the total.

The annual report on centenarians is released each year before the September 15 Respect for the Aged Day, a national holiday in Japan.

For the second straight year, 113-year-old Kamato Hongo remains the oldest living Japanese. Hongo lives with her 76-year-old daughter in Kagoshima, 985 kilometres, southwest of Tokyo on the southern island of Kyushu.

The average life expectancy in Japan is 83.99 years for women and 77.1 years for men, the highest in the world for both sexes, according to a recent Health and Welfare Ministry report. The Japanese have held that honour since 1986.

Japanese tend to live long partly because of a healthy diet and high quality medical care.

Speight fails to win his release from jail

SUVA, Sept 8: Fiji coup plotters George Speight today again failed to win his release from jail when a High Court judge decided he could not rule on an issue being dealt with by another judge, legal sources said, reports AFP.

The case against Speight and 24 others facing treason charges after the failed coup earlier this year was adjourned until September 22 by Justice Daniel Fatiaki after he met with defence lawyers in chambers for three hours.

Speight and his men have been held on the makeshift prison island of Nukulau east of here since the May 19 coup ended with the release of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his government held during a 56-day siege of parliament.

Defence lawyers argue that Speight and the others should be released because they are covered by an immunity given by the military at the end of the drama.

The military declared martial law on May 29 and have installed an interim civilian government headed by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase.

But the prosecutors have countered that the immunity decree was drawn up under duress while Speight and his men were holding the hostages and is therefore invalid.

Seoul calls for N Korea-US rapprochement

SEOUL, Sept 8: South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung has urged the United States to improve ties with North Korea while insisting that major hurdles to inter-Korean dialogue have been removed, officials said today, reports AFP.

The request was made when Kim met US President Bill Clinton on the margins of the UN Millennium Summit in New York Thursday, presidential spokesman Park Joon-Yong told journalists there.

Kim told Clinton that the historic inter-Korean summit in June had led the North's leader Kim Jong-Il to withdraw Pyongyang's three-point pre-conditions for dialogue with the South.

They included the withdrawal of 37,000 US troops from the South, the establishment of a confederation in any eventual reunification and the abolishment of the South's anti-North Korean National Security Law.

Kim Dae-Jung has said the

North's leader now accepts the need for the US military presence and the changes to the South's draconian security law have been proposed.

Now that these three issues were resolved, it is necessary for ties between North Korea and the United States and Japan to be improved for the stability and economic recovery in North Korea, Kim was quoted as telling Clinton.

Clinton expressed "unreserved support" for Kim Dae-Jung's constructive engagement policy, the spokesman said.

The two also agreed to try to ease North Korean anger over a protocol dispute with American Airlines security officials at Frankfurt airport.

North Korea's nominal head of state Kim Yong-Nam cancelled a planned flight to New York for the UN summit in protest at body searches, which were imposed because the North is still considered a state that sponsors terror-

ism.

Clinton repeatedly expressed regret over the incident, asking Kim Dae-Jung to help the United States soothe Pyongyang's anger.

The spokesman said the South Korean and US leaders did not discuss Kim's new peace initiative for the Korean peninsula as they "were preoccupied with other items."

The South Korean side had planned to propose a so-called "two-plus-two" format to work out a new Korean peace system to replace the 47-year-old armistice agreement signed at the end of the Korean War.

As the armistice agreement has not yet been replaced by a peace treaty, the two Koreas are still at war technically.

Under the proposal South and North Korea would first reach an agreement on a new peace regime, which would then be signed by the United States and China as guarantors.

BRIEFLY

Larger ozone hole detected over Antarctica

WASHINGTON, Sept 8: A US satellite has detected an ozone "hole" over Antarctica that is three times larger than the entire land mass of the United States -- the largest such area ever observed, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced Thursday, reports AFP.

The "hole" expanded to a record size of approximately 26.3 million square km (11 million square miles) on September 3, which by more than one million square km (half a million square miles) exceeds the previous record set in 1998, according to NASA.

"These observations reinforce concerns about the frailty of Earth's ozone layer," said Michael Kurylo, a NASA program manager.

Japanese navy officer arrested for leaking secrets to Russia

TOKYO, Sept 8: Japanese police arrested a senior naval officer today for passing defence secrets to a suspected Russian military spy, a police spokesman said, reports AFP.

Lieutenant Commander Shigehiro Hagsaki, a 38-year-old member of the Maritime Self-Defence Force, was arrested just before dawn after about nine hours of interrogation, he said.

The Japanese naval officer was in a secret dinner meeting Thursday evening with the Russian embassy official when police took him in for questioning, Tokyo police spokesman Masatoshi Konomi told AFP.

Hagsaki broke down in tears when police in business suits surrounded the pair in the Tokyo restaurant and showed him the warrant, said a police investigator speaking on condition of anonymity.

The man later confessed to spying, he said.

"I did not realise I was committing a crime. I thought it was part of my research work," he was quoted as telling police by Jiji Press.

The Russian embassy official, who reportedly worked for the Russian military's Main Intelligence Administration (GRU), immediately claimed diplomatic immunity.

A Russian embassy official in Tokyo identified the Russian man as 44-year-old naval attaché Captain Victor Bogatenkov, but declined to give further details.

Japan's government said the embassy refused a request for Bogatenkov to appear voluntarily before police. Police said they may ask the foreign ministry to expel him.

The arrest came just three days after a visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who met with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori in a vain attempt to resolve a 55-year-old territorial dispute.

Four islands, known as the southern Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan, were occupied by Soviet troops in the final days of World War II and a dispute over their ownership has blocked the signing of a peace treaty ever since.

"Unfortunately this case leads one to think that there exist in

Japan forces which are unhappy with the recent positive trends in Russian-Japanese relations," the Russian foreign ministry said.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Police's security investigation unit had been watching Hagsaki since September last year when he was a chief navigator for a Japanese naval escort ship.

In March this year, he was moved into a new job as a researcher on the former Soviet Union at the National Institute for Defence Studies, which examines Japan's defence strategies.

The pair had made contact about 10 times since December 1999 at bars, sushi shops and Chinese restaurants in central Tokyo which were crowded by office workers after work, said the Japanese investigator.

The Russian embassy official, who had fluent Japanese, paid for thousands of dollars worth of food and drink in return for copies of documents marked "Secret" and "Caution," which were not allowed to be removed from the defence institute, he said.

Blast kills 7 in Pakistan

LAHORE, Pakistan, Sept 8: The second bomb in five days ripped through a crowded area in the Pakistani city of Lahore, killing seven people and wounding more than 20, officials said, reports Reuters.

The bomb was planted on a scooter parked in the congested Dharampura bazaar and exploded during the rush hour on Thursday.

Seven people were killed, police said today. The death toll was initially reported to be three.

Government officials convened an emergency meeting in the city, capital of the central province of Punjab, an issued a statement around midnight that implied Indian agents were behind the blast.

"Anti-Pakistan elements are engaged in these activities and they are playing with the lives of innocent people," the statement from the Punjab government said.

Last Sunday, a bomb blast at the main bus station killed three people and wounded five.

No one has claimed responsibility for either attack.

China foils Taiwan's bid to join UN

TAIPEI, Sept 8: China has foiled Taiwan's bid to join the United Nations, prompting Taiwanese officials on Friday to accuse Beijing of "sinister behaviour," reports AP.

Taiwan's eighth attempt to enter the United Nations was expected to fail because of opposition from China, which insists the island is a breakaway province that should not be treated like an independent nation. The two sides split amid civil war in 1949.

A UN steering committee decided Thursday night not to put the issue on the UN General Assembly's agenda, Taiwan's Foreign Ministry said.

The committee's chairman, Former Finnish Premier Harri Holkeri, made the ruling after representatives from 74 nations opposed the proposal. Only 19 nations -- most of them small, developing African and Latin American allies of Taiwan supported the measure.

The United States, Britain, France and Russia -- all permanent members of the UN Security Council -- opposed the measure.

In a statement, the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry said, "We are angered by the Chinese communists' sinister behaviour."

The ministry complained that China blocked the UN application "despite our government's repeated displays of goodwill and appeals for the Chinese communists to cooperate with us and play a more positive role for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the Asian Pacific region."

The latest attempt to join the United Nations was Taiwan's first since newly elected President Chen Shui-Bian's took office in May.

China state-run Xinhua News Agency said Taiwan's UN defeat was a "heavy blow" for Chen's government. "It became clear that the new regime disregards past defeats and still wishes to regain access into the UN," the agency said.

Arafat rules out compromise on Jerusalem

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 8: US President Bill Clinton himself, Yasser Arafat seems very much concerned with his place in history these days, reports AP.

The 71-year-old former guerrilla chief, who has led the Palestinians through four turbulent decades, from exile and conflict to the brink of statehood, was faced with perhaps the most difficult decision of his political life during this week's Mideast consultations on the sidelines of the UN Millennium Summit.

Insistence on full control over all of east Jerusalem, including major Islamic shrines, might cost him the state he has fought for so long. Compromise could earn him the label of traitor in much of the Arab and Muslim world.

Arafat made it clear Thursday that despite strong pressure from

Israel, "I can't betray my people. I can't betray the Muslims," Arafat said.

Some of the bluster might be tactical. Arafat is a skilled, experienced negotiator, who has logged long hours with Israeli prime ministers and is known to sometimes use theatrics to confuse an opponent.

The Palestinian leader said Thursday that negotiations would continue, and that he hoped talks would focus not only on Jerusalem, but on other key issues, such as the future borders of a Palestinian state.

He said he paid little heed to being publicly blamed by the United States for the deadlock in the negotiations.

"I will continue to liberate all the Islamic and Muslim holy places," Arafat said with growing agitation, his voice rising.

"If not, another one will come to liberate them," he told the network.

Arafat said he simply did not have a mandate to relinquish Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem's walled Old City, or share sovereignty there with

First permanent transplant of artificial heart

PARIS, Sept 8: British and US doctors announced today they had carried out the first permanent transplant of a revolutionary type of artificial heart, a thumb-sized pump that had saved a 61-year-old man from imminent death, reports AFP.

The tiny titanium device holds out hopes for millions of people around the world who have chronic heart problems, they said.

The US-made gadget, Jarvik 2000, comprises a pump about the size of a "C" battery and weighing just 90 grams (three ounces).

The 100,000-dollar (115,000-euro) invention does not replace the natural heart. Instead, it is attached to the left ventricle, the chamber that gives the heart most of its pumping power when it contracts.

In an operation in Oxford, southern England, on June 20, a Jarvik 2000 was implanted in the chest of a 61-year-old patient who was only expected to survive a few more weeks, the doctors said.

Within six weeks, the Jarvik had sustained the patient's circulation, his heart and liver functions improved, as did his ability to exercise, enabling him to start living a normal life.

There were no more signs of heart failure, his blood pressure went down but without any adverse effects, and there was "negligible" damage to blood cells from the pump.

day's issue of The Lancet.

"Our laboratory experience and encouraging first clinical intervention with this small, silent intraventricular (device) suggests a potential alternative for many more patients."

"The device seems to be suitable for permanent use, bridge to transplant, or bridge to recovery."

The artificial heart has had a chequered history since it was first used in 1985.

Early optimism about these devices was dashed when the early models proved too big and cumbersome, their pump action caused blood clots and infections developed because of tubes that linked them to machines outside the body.

As a result, they only became used as temporary stand-ins, to help severely ill patients survive until they got a heart transplant.

French and Israeli doctors, in separate ventures this year, have carried out permanent transplants on two elderly patients, using much heavier devices weighing 1.4 kilos (3.2 pounds) and 350 grams (12.5 ounces). The Israeli patient died less than 48 hours later, although the heart had functioned correctly.

The Jarvik 2000 -- made by Robert Jarvik, who made the Jarvik 7, the first artificial heart -- is the smallest artificial heart, harnessing advances in miniaturisation to avoid the need for external tubes or implanted batteries.