

International

UN summit sets ambitious course for 21st century

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 9: Heads of state and government leaders from more than 150 countries ended an unprecedented UN Millennium Summit yesterday by setting an ambitious course for the 21st century, reports Reuters.

A resolution in the form of a Millennium Declaration, adopted by acclamation, pledged efforts in pursuit of peace, security, disarmament and the eradication of poverty.

"We are determined to establish a just and lasting peace all over the world in accordance with the objectives of the Charter," it vowed.

"We believe that the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalisation becomes a positive force for all the world's people," it said, reflecting efforts to ensure that an ever-tightly linked world economy

does not leave poorer countries behind.

The declaration endorsed targets set by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in a near-Utopian report last April that called for halving by the year 2015 the 22 per cent of the world's population now existing on less than a dollar a day. It also aimed at halting and reversing by then the scourge of AIDS, malaria and other major diseases.

By the same date, the world leaders resolved, boys and girls alike should be able to complete a full course of primary schooling, with maternal mortality reduced by three-quarters of current rates and under-5 child mortality cut by two-thirds.

The theme of the three-day Millennium Summit was "the United Nations in the 21st Century," with the declaration billed as its crowning achievement.

The leaders pledged to "spare

no effort to free our peoples from the scourge of war, whether within or between states, which has claimed more than 5 million lives in the past decades."

The document also took aim at such evils as transnational crime, including trafficking in human beings and money laundering. Also targeted were drugs and the illicit traffic in small arms that fuel numerous low-tech wars.

Without mentioning any specific examples, the declaration promised to minimise the adverse effects of UN economic sanctions on innocent populations and to strive for the elimination of weapons of mass destruction.

In a bid to meet Africa's special needs, it promised to support the consolidation of democracy there and to take "special measures to address the challenges of poverty-eradication and sustainable development."

The means cited included debt-cancellation, improved market access and increased flows of foreign investment and technology transfers.

Under the rubric of tolerance, the declaration said human beings "must respect each other in all their diversity of belief, culture and language."

"Differences within and between societies should neither be feared nor repressed, but cherished as a precious asset of humanity," it said.

A week before the opening of the Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, the declaration urged UN members "to observe the Olympic Truce," now and in the future. This ancient Greek tradition, revived by the General Assembly in 1993, stopped wars in their tracks, enabling athletes to travel and compete without fear of death or capture.

Lanka eases censorship restrictions

COLOMBO, Sept 9: Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has lifted a ban on public meetings and eased some censorship regulations amid opposition from local and international media groups, officials said Friday, reports AFP.

The blanket censorship was imposed on May 3 banning virtually any form of criticism of the government. It was replaced with restrictions on military operations against Tamil Tiger rebels.

"Basically the censorship will now be limited to reporting on the war," a government information department official said.

Chief censor Ariva Rubasinghe said the president had given five days to the censorship from Tuesday.

The move came five days after the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) urged President Kumaratunga to lift the censorship ahead of the October 10 parliamentary elections.

The CPJ said it was imperative that journalists in Sri Lanka were allowed to comment independently without fear of reprisals in the run up to polls.

The CPJ is dismayed by recent indications that censorship regulations are still in force in Sri Lanka, despite earlier assurances by the media minister (Mangala Samaraweera) that these restrictions would be lifted by mid-August, well in advance of the up-coming parliamentary elections," the CPJ said earlier this week.

Jordan eases visa restrictions

AMMAN, Sept 9: Jordan has eased visa restrictions for visitors from 13 countries in a bid to attract more tourists, according to a Tourism Ministry spokesman, reports AP.

The new entry regulations, which went into effect on September 1, applies to visitors from Israel, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, Iran, North Korea, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, India, China, Uzbekistan, Macedonia and the former Yugoslav Republic.

Visitors from those countries can obtain visas at Jordanian entry points provided they have return tickets and bank affidavits issued by certified tour operators in their home country, the spokesman said.

Previously, visitors from the 13 countries had to obtain visas from Jordanian diplomatic missions prior to coming to Jordan. Visa issuance used to take up to four weeks.

The spokesman said the fee for single entry and transit visas remained 15 dollars and double the amount for multiple entry visas valid for six months.

The new regulation also allows for visa exemption for tourist groups of at least five people over the age of 18 who plan to spend more than two nights in Jordan, he added.

Severe storm kills 42 in N Korea

BEIJING, Sept 9: A severe tropical storm that hit the northeastern coast of North Korea has caused widespread devastation and left at least 42 people dead, a UN official in China said today, reports DPA.

The worst storm in 30 years broke dikes in the south of the worst-hit Hamgyong province, causing the reported deaths, the UN coordinator for humanitarian aid for North Korea, David Morton, said in a statement distributed in Beijing.

Roads, railways, bridges and power and telephone lines were also destroyed. The storm hit on August 31, but news had only just filtered out from the secluded communist state.

Crops were also wrecked in the country where previous natural disasters and mismanagement have caused malnutrition. Heavy rains had caused further damage in the province of Ryanggang.

Several thousand people have been mobilised for rebuilding efforts, and financial aid was urgently needed.

Filipino rebels free four European hostages

JOLO, Philippines, Sept 9: Abu Sayyaf Muslim gunmen in the southern Philippines freed four Europeans among their 23 hostages after a bloody shoot-out over a cash ransom dispute, officials said, reports AFP.

The rebels turned over the four European hostages to top government negotiator Roberto Aventajado's emissaries who were earlier ambushed by a faction of the Abu Sayyaf unhappy over the distribution of millions of dollars in ransom money.

Military helicopters later plucked Frenchman Stephane Loisy, Finns Seppo Fraenti and Risto Vahanen and Marc Waller of Germany, as well as the emissaries from the Abu Sayyaf, and took them to nearby Zamboanga city.

European government representatives were to receive the freed hostages there, the negotiator Roberto Aventajado said.

Sources said that according to an agreement struck with the Abu Sayyaf, two French journalists among the remaining hostages would be released in two days but Libyan negotiator Rajab Azzarouq said they might encounter "problems" because of infighting among the gunmen.

The French journalists, Jean-Jacques le Garrec and Roland Madura were seized while covering the

hostage crisis in July.

Aside from the journalists, the Abu Sayyaf are holding one American and 16 Filipino hostages.

The fighting in Jolo Island threatened to scuttle a painstakingly arranged deal brokered by Libya under which the Abu Sayyaf was supposed to hand over the European captives in exchange for pledges of up to 10 million dollars in "development aid" from Tripoli.

Sources close to the negotiations say millions of dollars in ransom have been paid to the Muslim extremists to secure the hostages so far.

Aventajado said his emissaries Ernesto Pacuno and Salim Jumaa were ambushed by a faction of the Abu Sayyaf gunmen while en route to the village of Bandang for the handover.

Witnesses said the attack was mounted in the village of Pantao Dahli by a Commander Nandy whose faction holds the two French journalists.

Nandy's boss, Abu Sabar, later fought with the faction headed by Galib Andang, alias Commander Robot, and Mujib Susukan, who had been handed over in the rain-swollen waters of the Pilakhar river.

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Police officials, however, confirmed Saturday that they had received reports that 31 people were rescued or swam ashore.

13 drown in India boat capsiz

LUCKNOW, Sept 9: An overcrowded boat capsized in a river in India's most populous state, drowning 13 people, police said Saturday, reports AP.

One body was washed ashore, nearly five kilometers (three miles) downstream from Pasupura village in the northern Uttar Pradesh state, Police Superintendent MK Bashal, of nearby Rampur town, told The Associated Press. The boat had overturned in the rain-swollen waters of the Pilakhar river.

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