

International

Manila launches offensive against hostage-takers

Troops close in on Abu Sayyaf hideouts

JOLO, Philippines, Sept 16: The Philippines launched a massive but risky military operation today to rescue 22 hostages held by Muslim rebels on the southern island of Jolo, President Joseph Estrada said, reports AFP.

There were no details of casualties or the condition of the one American, two French, three Malaysian and 16 Filipino hostages after the pre-dawn onslaught, but military sources said scores of people could have been wounded or killed in the operation. In a nationwide television broadcast, Estrada said he ordered the troops to move in after all efforts towards a negotiated settlement of the nearly five-month crisis were exhausted.

He said the military intervention was a "difficult decision" and that he was aware of the "grave risks that the hostages and our soldiers would face."

"This situation cannot last one minute longer. Enough is enough," said Estrada, looking grave and hunched in front of the television camera.

Military aircraft pounded Abu Sayyaf rebel hideouts with bombs from 1:00 a.m. today (23:00 BST Friday). Communication and transport links with Jolo were cut off almost immediately and the entire island plunged into darkness after a power cut.

"Scores could have died already," said a military intelligence source, who asked not to be named. He declined to give further details.

Hours after the military raid, French President Jacques Chirac expressed his "lively concern and disagreement" to Estrada, saying he held Manila responsible for the safety of the western hostages.

Two French journalists are among the hostages, and negotiators had hoped to have secured their release early Saturday.

However top government negotiator Roberto Aventajado said a panel including Libyan mediator Rajab Azzarouq, which was negotiating with rebels and had secured the freedom of several hostages earlier, had been disbanded.

Another report adds: Philippine troops have entered the jungle hideouts of Muslim extremists holding 22 hostages in Jolo island but there is no guarantee all captives would be pulled out safely, President Joseph Estrada's spokesman said today.

The troops are now in position and they have been able to establish contact with the principal areas where the hostages are located," said Estrada spokesman Ricardo Puno, who refused to discuss details of the operation against the Abu Sayyaf rebels.



Philippine President Joseph Estrada, assisted by a military aide, prepares to tape a public statement yesterday where he announced a military assault on Muslim extremist kidnappers holding 22 people in the southern Island of Jolo. Estrada said "enough is enough" as he abandoned the negotiations for the hostages in the south. --AFP photo

ETA chief arrested in France

BAYONNE, France, Sept 16: Ignacio Gracia Arregui, the suspected leader of the Basque separatist group ETA which is alleged to have carried out a series of murders and bomb attacks in Spain this year, was arrested Friday at his villa in southwest France, police said, reports AFP.

Also known as "Inaki de Renteria," Gracia Arregui, 44, is suspected by Spanish anti-terrorist officials of masterminding an attempt on the life of Spain's King Juan Carlos in 1995.

Delhi directs Jyoti Basu to curb violence

NEW DELHI, Sept 16: In a stung warning to the West Bengal government, the centre yesterday accused it of failure to satisfactorily deal in checking the spate of political violence in the state and directed it to take firm steps to bring down violence, reports PTI.

Citing six instances of political violence among 33 such incidents which were specifically brought to the notice of the state government, Union Home Minister K. Advani, in a letter to Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, said our concerns have not been satisfactorily dealt with by your government.

C'wealth warns Pakistan of stronger measures

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 16: Commonwealth nations, impatient for a return to democracy in Pakistan, warned that country on Friday that it could face the ultimate sanction of suspension from the 54-nation group, reports Reuters.

They also expressed continued dissatisfaction with the overthrow of the democratic government in Fiji.

Secretary-General Don McKinnon said the 11-member Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group agreed there were no grounds to soften its stance or ease the suspension of both countries from the organisation's council.

"We made abundantly clear to the Pakistani foreign minister Abdul Sattar that unless a firmer timetable is achieved for restoring

democracy we will have no alternative but to recommend to the next Commonwealth heads-of-government meeting to take stronger measures," Botswana Foreign Minister Mompatti Merafhe said.

The ultimate, of course, is suspension from the Commonwealth," he told a news conference.

Sattar ended in vain with the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group agreed there were no grounds to soften its stance or ease the suspension of both countries from the organisation's council.

"The current Commonwealth policy is tantamount to sympathy for the corrupt regimes and penalisation of those who seek to devise ways and means to curb corruption and promote good

governance," Sattar said.

The ministers agreed only to offer technical assistance requested by Pakistan in preparing electoral rolls.

Gen. Pervez Musharraf's military government has said the country would return to democracy by October 2002 but the Commonwealth wants a firm timetable for an earlier return to parliamentary democracy.

On Fiji, the ministers heard pleas both from ousted democratic Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhury, an ethnic Indian taken hostage by ethnic Fijian gunmen and overthrown earlier this year, and from the head of the South Pacific country's interim government, Laisenia Qarase.

Junta blocks road to NLD HQs

YANGON, Sept 16: Military authorities on Saturday blocked the road to the headquarters of the democratic opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi, two days after announcing the easing of tough restrictions against the party, witnesses said, reports AP.

Traffic police and plainclothes intelligence officers were manning road blocks marked by no entry signs on the approaches to the two-storey National League for Democracy office in downtown Yangon, where the party planned to hold a meeting Saturday afternoon.

Suu Kyi tried to travel outside Yangon for party work.

On Friday, NLD leaders emerged from their homes and reopened the party headquarters, which were raided Sept 2 by the authorities. The government justified its actions by saying it was investigating alleged NLD links with terrorists.

At the first anniversary commemoration of the CRPF, the road was cordoned off and diplomats and reporters were blocked from attending, but NLD leaders and some members were allowed in and it went ahead.

Lanka minister among 14 killed in helicopter crash

Colombo braces for more suicide bombings ahead of polls



M.H. M. Ashraff

fire ball," a police spokesman said.

The helicopter went down at Aranayake, 110 km east of Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance Coalition party.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan police stepped up already tight security in Colombo today, a day after a suicide bomber killed seven and raised fears of more bombings ahead of next month's parliamentary elections.

Colombo's police chief Bodi Liyanage said they had information that at least 23 suicide bombers known as Black Tigers had entered the capital together with another 15 rebels deployed for spying missions.

Suharto's son quizzed by police

JAKARTA, Sept 16: The youngest son of former Indonesian president Suharto, under investigation for possible links to bombings in Jakarta, was quizzed for more than two hours at police headquarters here today, witnesses said.

"We want to put an end to this practice. We want to paralyse the militants economically," he said, adding that the farmers preferred to cultivate opium because of the huge financial returns.

"The primary duty of the police is to destroy the crops. Once that is done arrests will follow," the police chief warned.

A senior civilian official said the state government would back the police in eradicating opium from Anantnag, a sprawling farming district of Kashmir.

"We will set fire to the whole crop in the district. If this trend is allowed to continue it will prove fatal for the entire state and turn Kashmir into mini-Afghanistan," he said, adding the funds were

Opium crops burned to combat Kashmir rebels

SRINAGAR, India, Sept 16: Police in the northern Indian state of Kashmir have begun to burn down opium crops saying the proceeds are used to fund Muslim militancy in the troubled region, officials said here today, reports AFP.

They said police in the past few days had burned scores of acres (hectares) of standing opium crops in the southern Kashmiri regions of Bijbehara and Dupatar in Anantnag district.

The police have also extended their operation to the Qazigund belt, where the crop is ready for harvesting," said Munir Khan, Anantnag district police chief.

Khan said illegal cultivation of opium had assumed "alarming proportions" in the district.

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