

Hizbul threatens escalation of violence in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Sept 17: The Hizbul Mujahideen threatened today to induct freshly trained rebels, bolster its armory and escalate its bloody campaign against Indian rule in Kashmir, reports AFP.

The separatist group, which walked out of a truce in August, also renewed its offer for talks with India but maintained that Pakistan must be included in any negotiations on the disputed territory.

"The outfit at present has plans to intensify actions against security forces in Kashmir and other parts of the country," Hizbul commander Assad Yazdani told

the Press Trust of India (PTI).

He also said his group would "increase the number of skilled militants, acquire more sophisticated weapons and at the same time garner public support."

Yazdani, a senior Hizbul strategist, said a universally accepted ceasefire in Kashmir could be reached provided India agreed to include Pakistan in the talks.

"Let India respond positively first," Yazdani said. "The future ceasefire will be an absolute one and every outfit operating in the (Kashmir) valley will abide by it."

Yazdani participated in talks after the botched ceasefire offered by Hizbul on July 24.

Hizbul's Pakistan-based chief Syed Salahuddin revoked the ceasefire on August 8 citing Indian intransigence over demands that Pakistan be involved in the talks.

Yazdani said fresh talks could start immediately if India agreed to the pre-conditions.

"Yes, we are ready even for bilateral talks with India provided final settlement of (the) Kashmir imbroglio is through tripartite agreement," he said.

Yazdani added "Pakistan, being a party to the issue, ... cannot be sidelined."

Yazdani said Hizbul would "take into confidence all militant

groups" before offering a fresh ceasefire in Kashmir.

The guerrilla commander also said foreign Islamic guerrillas fighting Indian forces in Kashmir would also accept a Hizbul-sponsored ceasefire provided New Delhi softened its stand.

The Muslim separatist campaign in the Indian part of Kashmir has claimed some 34,000 lives since 1989.

India, which controls the southern two-thirds of Kashmir, accuses Pakistan of arming and training Kashmiri separatists, a charge Islamabad denies.

28 Indian, Pak nationals held in Greece

ATHENS, Sept 17: Greek police in Corinth on Saturday arrested 28 illegal immigrants from India and Pakistan who were hidden in a truck parked in the western town's port area, police said, reports AFP.

Three of the immigrants were admitted to hospital with breathing difficulties, and one of them died shortly afterwards.

Port authorities launched an inquiry into the case of trafficking and the death of the immigrant.

The truck belonged to the Greek firm Venieris and was due to be loaded on to a ship bound for Italy, the police said.

Vajpayee to face knee surgery next month

NEW DELHI, Sept 17: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who is currently touring the US, will undergo vital knee surgery after next month's visit to India by Russian President Vladimir Putin, newspapers said today, reports AFP.

Newspapers quoting Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani said Vajpayee, who shortened his visit to the United States by two days to 10 days, will face surgery for a replacement of a knee-joint only after Putin's upcoming trip.

The Russian leader is set to reach India on October 2 on a four-day state visit.

India and Russia are expected to re-write a strategic partnership treaty to further strengthen warm political and military ties during Putin's hectic schedule in New Delhi.

Advani also said the surgery, recommended by doctors who attended to the Indian leader in the US, was not likely to keep Vajpayee away from work for very long.

100 commit suicide after Taiwan's fatal quake

PULI, Taiwan, Sept 17: At least one hundred quake victims that survived a devastating tremor in Taiwan one year ago have committed suicide having suffered severe depression, officials say, reports AFP.

"Suicide has become almost a daily occurrence since last year's quake," said an official from the cabinet's quake reconstruction committee.

"At least 100 suicides linked to the quake have been reported," she said, but declined to specify the number.

As well as being overwhelmed by grief over the loss of family members, financial problems, such as unemployment and mortgage repayments on homes destroyed in the quake, have also pushed people to the edge recently, she said.

Ferry with 100 passengers runs aground

LONDON, Sept 17: A ferry belonging to the British Petrol line on the run between Liverpool and Dublin ran aground early Sunday shortly after setting sail but the 100 passengers on board were not in any danger, coast guards said, reports AFP.

The 12,000-ton boat touched the bottom at low tide, near the coast. It would be refloated when the tide turned in the early afternoon, they said.

Kuwait issues stern warning to Iraq

US forces in Gulf fully prepared to stop any aggression by Baghdad

KUWAIT CITY, Sept 17: Kuwait's Defence Minister Sheikh Salem al-Sabah warned that Iraqi leaders will pay a "heavy price" if they commit a "military folly" against the emirate, in remarks quoted today, reports AFP.

"The Iraqi leadership will pay a heavy price this time if it commits a military folly against Kuwait," Sheikh Salem told Al-Rai Al-Aam daily.

"Conditions now are radically different from 1990. We have taken all precautions against any attempt of treachery. Believers are not bitten twice from the same (snake's) hole," said Sheikh Salem, quoting a proverb.

Iraq on Thursday charged that the emirate had been stealing oil from an Iraqi oilfield close to the border, the same allegations which led to the 1990 invasion.

Kuwait denied the charges as "lies" and accused Baghdad of provoking another war in the region.

"Threats which are always launched by the Iraqi regime do not scare us, whether it was serious or for political purposes. This regime has lost its credibility and international legitimacy," Sheikh Salem said.

Peru's president to leave office, calls fresh polls

LIMA, Sept 17: In a dramatic and unexpected move, Peru's President Alberto Fujimori announced a new round of general elections late Saturday, and said that he would not stand as a candidate in the upcoming vote, reports AFP.

The surprise announcement, nationally broadcast on radio and television, effectively marked the Peruvian leader's resignation from office, although it was not clear exactly when elections would be held or how soon he would withdraw from political life.

Fujimori said that the vote would be held "in the near future."

He told television viewers that he had reached the decision to hold immediate elections "after a period of deep reflection," adding that "the person who is now speaking will not be a candidate."

The bombshell comes barely four months after Fujimori was reelected for a third consecutive five-year term, with nearly 52 per cent of the vote.

The announcement of his early departure was especially surprising because Fujimori has held a tenacious grip on the presidency over the past decade, using a vast array of political stratagems over the years -- from suspending the constitution to dissolving Congress -- to maintain his hold on power.

The political upheaval appeared to be fallout from a corruption scandal which has rocked Peru over the past few days, after the head of the National Intelligence Service (SIN) was shown in a 58-minute video apparently handing a bribe to a former member of the Peruvian opposition.

In the video, SIN chief Vladimir Montesinos was seen handing over 15,000 dollars in cash to Alberto Kouri, a former member of Peru's Fujimori party who recently switched to Fujimori's Peru 2000 party.

A voice on the video, apparently that of Montesinos, is clearly heard asking Kouri, "How

much? Here are 10, you tell me."

As he takes another envelope from his pocket, the voice is heard saying, "Ten plus five, fifteen."

Fujimori heeded international calls to act in the scandal, telling Peruvians late Saturday that he had decided to dismantle the intelligence service.

Only hours before Fujimori announced his departure Saturday, the Organization of American States (OAS) urged Peru's government to suspend Montesinos, saying the corruption allegations were "of the utmost gravity."

Adding insult to injury for Fujimori, is that his ex-wife, Susana Higuchi -- now among his most ardent adversaries -- announced the existence of the incriminating video late Thursday, before it was broadcast across the nation by the Canal N cable TV channel. Higuchi is now an opposition congress member with the Moralizing Independent Front (FIM) party.

Opposition groups in Peru said the film footage provided irrefutable proof that Fujimori had used bribes to win political opponents to his side, thereby gaining control of the national Congress after this year's elections.

During the elections in April, Fujimori's party managed to win just 53 of a possible 120 congressional seats. But that number rose to nearly 70 by the time he took office on July 28, as members of the opposition Peru Possible party suspiciously defected en masse.

The video was allegedly filmed on May 5, mid-way between the two rounds of the election.

Public outrage and political pressure on Fujimori mounted steadily over the weekend after the scandal came to light, with ex-presidential candidate Alejandro Toledo called on the president to resign and for a one-year transitional government to be installed.



Alberto Fujimori

Hostage rescue operation may take a week

All hostages are alive

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, Sept 17: A military operation to rescue 22 hostages, including six foreigners, in the southern Philippine island of Jolo could take up to a week, the ground commander told President Joseph Estrada today, reports AFP.

Army Brigadier General Narciso Abaya, speaking from Jolo, told Estrada in a teleconference at a military base here that the operation, which began early Saturday, could take "three days to one week."

"We are banking on you, Abaya," Estrada said during the conversation, which took place during a photo opportunity attended by photographers and a television crew.

Estrada ordered Abaya specifically to secure the freedom of two French journalists among the hostages without putting their lives at risk.

French television journalists Jean-Jacques Le Garrec and Roland Madura were abducted while covering the hostage crisis in July.

The other captives are American tourist Jeffrey Schilling, three Malaysians and 16 Filipinos.

During his three-hour visit, Estrada was briefed by the top military brass at the southern military command in southern Zamboanga city, from where top security officials were directing the operations in Jolo.

Meanwhile, six Muslim extremist kidnappers have been killed and 12 people wounded in a massive Philippine military operation to rescue 22 hostages including six foreigners, officials said today.

Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado said six Abu Sayyaf gunmen were killed and 20 others

captured, including four wounded guerrillas.

Four government troops were also wounded, he said.

The mayor of Jolo, Rashid Abubakar, said four civilians were wounded in the fighting, which he said was outside the island's main population centres.

Another report says, twenty-two hostages held by Muslim extremist guerrillas are alive two days into a military rescue operation in the southern Philippine island of Jolo, armed forces chief of staff General Angelo Reyes said Sunday.

"Reports about some of the hostages being dead or having been killed, in our assessment are rumours. We are exerting all efforts to have them verified and our efforts have shown us all these are false," he told a news conference.

BRIEFLY

Iran hangs 2 rapists:

Two Iranians convicted of raping two women and 17 underage girls were hanged in public in the northwestern province of Qazvin, newspaper reports said Sunday, AFP says from Tehran.

Amir Sadami, 21, and Morteza Abdollahi 22, were hanged Saturday in the presence of a small crowd, the Jomhuri Eslami paper said. It said the pair lured their victims into an apartment they had rented and raped them last year. They were also convicted of drinking alcoholic beverages.

Mild quake jolts S India:

A mild earthquake jolted the southern Indian cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad early Sunday, but there were no immediate reports of damage or casualties, officials said, AFP reports from New Delhi.

People fled their homes in panic as the quake, measuring 2.5 on the Richter Scale, shook Hyderabad and neighbouring Secunderabad at around 1:00 a.m. Sunday, (1:30 BST Saturday), the Indian Meteorological Department in New Delhi said.

Two killed in Aceh: At least two people, including one policeman, were killed and nine others injured in the latest violence to rock the restive Indonesian province of Aceh, police said Sunday, AFP reports from Banda Aceh.

A policeman was killed when Muslim rebels attacked seven police-military patrols across East Aceh on Saturday night. Four more policemen and two soldiers were injured in the attack. Superintendent Kusubini Imbar said. The policeman died when a joint military and police patrol was attacked as it moved in to raid a suspected rebel base in Paya Meuligo, Pereulak subdistrict, Imbar -- Aceh police spokesman -- told AFP.

Rains kill 19 in Guatemala:

At least 19 people have been killed by torrential rains to hit Guatemala in the last three days, emergency service officials said Saturday, AFP reports from Guatemala City.

Two children died Friday when a mudslide destroyed their home on the northern outskirts of the capital, said William de Leon, a spokesman for volunteer firefighters. One adult was killed in the port of San Jose, some 75 km south of Guatemala City, he added.



People push a boat across a road leading to the Vietnam-Cambodian border in Hong Ngu district, southern province of Dong Thap in Vietnam's Mekong Delta on Saturday. Flooding in the Delta has killed ten people, while water levels continued to rise each day. The situation is particularly severe in the provinces of An Giang, Dong Thap, Long An and Kien Giang, where 126,475 houses were flooded and about 50,000 people have been evacuated. --AFP photo

Lanka mourns death of minister amid attacks

COLOMBO, Sept 17: A senior Sri Lankan Muslim minister, killed in a helicopter crash, was buried here early today amid nationwide mourning although the funeral was marred by attacks against rival politicians, reports AFP.

Ports minister M. H. M. Ashraff was killed, along with 14 others Saturday, when their helicopter crashed into a mountain in central Aranyake region, shortly after announcing his party would

cut ties with the ruling coalition.

Ashraff's remains were brought to the capital Saturday evening for a funeral ceremony that lasted well beyond midnight. Thousands paid their respects both at his home and also attended the burial.

At the minister's tightly-guarded home, hundreds gathered to pay their respects to the former Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader.



The remains of Sri Lanka's Ports Minister M.H.M. Ashraff and 14 others are brought down from the mountain top crash site after a Mi-17 helicopter, they were travelling on, crashed on Saturday. --AFP photo

Bihar has most deaths in police custody than any other states

NEW DELHI, Sept 17: The impoverished, lawless state of Bihar in eastern India has reported more unexplained deaths in police custody than any other province, the country's independent Human Rights Commission said today, reports AFP.

Bihar topped the list with 162 such deaths over the year up to March 2000, while western Maharashtra state ranked a close second with 160 suspected murders in police lock-up during the period, the national rights panel said.

"While Bihar saw a marginal decline with 162 cases of custodial deaths in 1999-2000 as against 192 in the previous year, there has been an increase in the number of such deaths in Maharashtra with 160 cases as against 118 in the corresponding period," it said.

A panel official said the agency

received as many as 1,097 reports of death in police custody across the entire country during the period.

Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, ranked third with 159 unexplained deaths, he said.

The federal territory of Chandigarh was the only region in India with a clean slate.

The Indian national capital reported an average of two such deaths every month during the fiscal year, he added.

"A systematic effort to curb custodial violence has been a major priority of the national human rights commission over the past five years," the official said.

He said the commission has issued a string of guidelines to all states to enforce prison reforms, look after mentally-disturbed convicts and ensure the safety of all detained suspects.

10 Muslim rebels killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Sept 17: Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged heavy artillery fire overnight in Kashmir, as 10 suspected Muslim separatist guerrillas were killed in the disputed region, officials said here today, reports AFP.

Pakistani gunners late Saturday night pounded Indian military posts in southern Kashmir's Gurez district, the officials said, adding that a stray shell hit a house injuring two civilians critically.

Four other civilian buildings were destroyed by incoming shells, they said.

Indian artillery batteries retaliated and attacked rival positions across an imaginary border that separates the India and Pakistani zones of divided Kashmir, the officials said in Srinagar.

Indian and Pakistani troops also exchanged fire in the frontier Kashmir districts of Karnal, Tangdar, Teetwal, Nowgam and Uri, a defence ministry spokesman said.

The police, meanwhile, said 10 alleged Muslim guerrillas were killed by Indian army troops in a fierce overnight gunbattle in the Indian zone of Kashmir.

The clash occurred at the border in the southern Kashmir district of Poonch, a police spokesman said, adding the two sides used machineguns in the fighting, one of the most fierce in the region in recent days.

First Arab summit on women Nov 18

CAIRO, Sept 17: Arab countries are scheduled to hold the first summit on November 18 to discuss women's role in the Arab society, an official of the Arab League said on Saturday, reports Xinhua.

The summit, which will run for three days, is aimed at shedding light on Arab women's role in addressing challenges to the Arab countries in the new era. Azza al Atefi, director of the Women Department of the Arab League told Egypt's Middle East News Agency.

The idea of holding such a summit also has resulted from the fact that women have the responsibility to take part in building Arab society to achieve a sustained social and economic development, al Atefi added.

It is also to highlight the leading role played by the mass media in facing up to challenges of globalisation, communications revolution and the media's impact on woman and Arab identity and culture, the official of the pan-Arab forum said.

Indian jeweler shot dead in Bangkok

BANGKOK, Sept 17: An Indian jeweler was shot and killed at his home in Bangkok and two other people were wounded, Thai newspapers reported Sunday, says AP.

Police confirmed that an Indian man was shot to death Friday, but officers on duty Sunday said they could not provide further details as they were not handling the case.

Thai newspapers gave conflicting reports about the name of the dead man, said to own the First Class Jewellery Co in Bangkok. His wife and another man were wounded, the reports said.

Corruption scam 100 suspects face trial in China

BEIJING, Sept 17: Almost 100 suspects have appeared before courts in China in five trials organised simultaneously to try the biggest corruption scandal in the history of the communist regime, a Chinese Internet site said today, reports AFP.

The 96 suspects, who allegedly organised a huge smuggling ring in the southeastern province of Fujian, were being tried in five major towns in the province, phoenix.com reported.

These were Xiamen, Fuzhou, Zhangzhou, Quanzhou and Putian, it said.

Pro-Moscow dy police chief shot dead in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Sept 17: A Chechen deputy police chief serving with pro-Moscow forces in the break-away republic was shot dead overnight, ITAR-TASS reported today, says AFP.

Lieutenant Colonel Shamil Azayev, deputy police commander in the southeastern Vedeno district, died in a hail of bullets fired by unidentified gunmen who drove up to his door, the agency cited Chechnya's military commandant, General Ivan Babichev, as saying.

ITAR-TASS did not say where the attack took place, but the main population centre in the mountainous area, Vedeno, was once the stronghold of feared Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev.

Nepal bans torchlight procession

KATHMANDU, Sept 17: Nepal has banned torchlight processions throughout the kingdom, state-run radio announced today, reports AFP.

The ban has been imposed to protect life and property of the general public," it said quoting a home ministry order.

But it was believed the ban was aimed at leftist parties, which usually stage the nighttime processions 12 hours ahead of strike calls to garner support.

The order comes four days ahead of a national strike called by nine left-wing parties supported by the underground Maoist rebels for Thursday.

The Maoists, who have been waging a "people's war" since 1996 against the constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy established in 1990 want communist rule in the country.

The fighting has left 1,388 people dead, and more than 2,000 people injured.

The leftist parties complain of various government shortcomings and allegedly unequal treaties with India.

Solomon Islands militants seize aircraft

GIZO, Solomon Islands, Sept 17: Solomon Islands militants have hijacked a light aircraft and kidnapped its pilot, authorities said today, reports AFP.

A faction of the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) led by Harold Keke, seized the aircraft at Babanakra on Guadalcanal's isolated Weather Coast on Saturday and demanded two million Solomon dollars (200,000 US\$).