

Glittering banquet for Vajpayee heralds new era of Indo-US ties

WASHINGTON, Sept 18: President Bill Clinton toasted a vibrant new partnership between India and the United States Sunday as he hosted a glittering White House banquet for Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, reports AFP.

Clinton put the seal on Vajpayee's five-day official visit to Washington at an event attended by 900 guests, including leading Indian business tycoons, in a luxurious marquee pitched on White House grounds.

The posh soiree was the largest state dinner in the nearly eight years of the Clinton administration.

Both sides say Vajpayee's visit, which followed Clinton's tour of India earlier this year, has helped forge a new era in relations between the world's lone superpower and its largest democracy.

"We have together built the strongest and most mature partnership India and America have ever known," Clinton said.

"We have so very much more to learn from each other, in both our societies you can find virtually every challenge humanity knows -- in both our societies you can find virtually every solution to those challenges."

Clinton and Vajpayee were joined at the top table by First Lady Hillary Clinton, who wore a flowing russet brown ballgown, as she took time off from her campaign for a Senate seat in the state of New York.

Vajpayee, who sparked concern over his health earlier in the visit after cancelling a joint press conference with Clinton, appeared robust, as he replied to Clinton's toast.

"It is a testimony to your courage and leadership that you dare to cross the territory of doubt, to reach out to the hearts of Indian people," he said in a speech striking for its warm praise of the president.

India and the United States are attempting to forge a new relationship after years of mutual suspicion during the Cold War, when New Delhi favoured the Soviet Union.

Among those feting the Indian prime minister were stars of screen, sport and the Internet revolution, including Saabir Bhatia, founder of the Internet mail service Hotmail, according to a White House guest list.

Former Indian tennis star Vijay Amritraj, who now works as a commentator on the sport was also among 900 guests seated in a luxurious marquee lit by thousands of candles and chandeliers, pitched in the grounds of the White House.

Actress Goldie Hawn and model and activist Christie Brinkley were also among the guests, who included scores of government officials from both major US political parties and supporters of President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton.



(L-R) US First Lady Hillary Clinton, US President Bill Clinton and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee pose for a photograph on Sunday as the Clintons welcomed Vajpayee to the White House for a state dinner in honour of the Indian premier.

--AFP photo

Belgrade court opens trial of 14 NATO leaders in absentia

BELGRADE, Sept 18: A Belgrade court today opened a trial in absentia of 14 NATO leaders accused of war crimes related to last year's bombardment of Yugoslavia, reports AFP.

US President Bill Clinton, French President Jacques Chirac and British Prime Minister Tony Blair are among the accused.

Presiding judge Veroljub Rakitic said the accused had all been sent a list of the charges through diplomatic channels and would be represented by 14 court-appointed lawyers.

Laden survives assassination

TEHRAN, Sept 18: Exiled Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden, wanted by the United States for terrorism, recently survived an assassination attempt in Afghanistan, Iran's official IRNA news agency said today.

Bin Laden escaped unharmed when unknown attackers fired rockets on his convoy as it passed through the Afghan city of Kandahar, the agency told AFP, confirming reports in the Tehran press.

Reports cited witnesses saying that several cars belonging to his bodyguards had been destroyed and that the ruling Taliban Islamic militia in Afghanistan had tried to quash reports of the attack.

Libya slams US warnings against Iraq

TRIPOLI, Sept 18: Libya on Sunday criticised the United States' recent warnings of military action against Iraq, drawing a link between the threats and the current world problems regarding the high price of oil, reports AFP.

The US threats come at a moment when the world faces a grave oil crisis, and they concern Iraq, an oil-producing country in a sensitive part of the globe, the state news agency JANA reported.

It added that the US military presence in the Gulf -- presently significantly reinforced because of an overlap as forces are rotated into and out of the region -- was a "waste".

Troops attack residence of Ivory Coast junta leader

ABIDJAN, Sept 18: Soldiers attacked the residence of Ivory Coast military ruler Robert Guei before dawn today, but they were repelled by troops loyal to the general, sources close to the attackers told AFP.

The sources acknowledged that their bid against Guei had "failed" two hours after the attack with automatic weapons began around 3:30 a.m. (9:30 BST).

Loyalist troops and residents of the neighbourhood said the fighting ended around 5:30 a.m. There was no immediate word on casualties and it was not known if Guei, who seized power in December in this country's first military coup, was in the residence in Abidjan's Indenie neighbourhood at the time.

Tensions have been rising in Ivory Coast ahead of a presidential election scheduled for October 22 in which Guei is a candidate in defiance of strong criticism at home and from both France, the former colonial power, and the United States.

The sources close to the mutineers said they were angry with Guei for "failing to live up to his promises".

Identity of WWII POW finally known

BUDAPEST, Sept 18: World War II's longest serving prisoner-of-war is called Andras Toma and was born in the eastern Hungarian village Ujfeherto, the defence ministry told AFP today ending weeks of uncertainty, reports AFP.

"I can confirm that he is Andras Toma. All the existing documents and data fit in," defence ministry spokesman Zoltan Szokolay said.

The Hungarian, who was repatriated last month after spending 53 years isolated in a Russian mental clinic under the name Andras Tamas, visited his family for the first time Saturday, accompanied by defence officials and doctors, Szokolay confirmed.

It was astonishing to see how he recognised people on the spot and showed, for example, where the coat of arms used to be on the wall of his old school building. Nobody could bear it without tears," said Szokolay.

The 75-year-old met his half sister Anna and half brother Janos in the small farming hamlet of Sulyanbodor, off the eastern city Nyiregyhaza, some 180 km off Budapest, Szokolay said.

Doctors are to perform a DNA test this week on the former detainee and the family members to get a final confirmation, he added.

Earth at risk from asteroids

LONDON, Sept 18: Batten down the hatches and take cover. The risk of Earth being struck by an asteroid is not the stuff of mere science fiction but should be taken seriously, according to a British report published today, reports AFP.

It estimates that an object 100 metres across crashes onto our planet every 10,000 years with the force of a 100-megaton bomb.

Every 100,000 years an object one kilometre long strikes Earth with a force equivalent to 10 million times the impact of the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima in Japan at the end of World War II.

Astronomers say there are nearly 1,000 asteroids measuring one kilometre or larger in orbits which cross Earth's path.

Dinosaurs are thought to have been wiped out in the devastating impact of a 10-kilometre object which struck the Earth 65 million years ago.

Science minister Lord Sainsbury, who set up a government task force earlier this year to look at the danger posed by asteroids, admitted the risk of being struck was "extremely remote."

"On the other hand, if it occurred, it would be very serious indeed ... so it is a serious issue," he told BBC radio.

"We put a lot of money into astrology, I think it's sensible to put just a little bit in to making certain that we know if there is a danger of an object hitting our very fragile planet."

Among the report's 14 recommendations are that Britain

should take a bigger role in a greater global effort to study the problem; improve its ability to detect any incoming objects; and assess the risks and consequences of such an impact.

Lord Sainsbury is expected to take several months to decide whether to act on the report's recommendations.

"I think it sets out clearly and authoritatively the nature of the risk, and it suggests the sort of international action that we should participate in to at least monitor what the situation is so that we know if there's going to be any problem," he said.

"I think what we are talking about here is, first of all, observation ... and then, secondly, trying to find out more about comets and asteroids."

8 to die in Jordan for links to Laden

AMMAN, Sept 18: A Jordanian state security court today sentenced to death eight Islamic militants for links to international terrorist suspect Osama Bin Laden and for plotting anti-Western bombings last year in Jordan, reports AFP.

Six of those sentenced were convicted in absentia, while the other two are being held in prison. The verdicts are not final and may be appealed.

Another 14 of the 28 defendants in the case were given sentences ranging between seven-and-a-half and 15 years in prison and the remaining six were

acquitted.

Prosecutors said Khader Abu Hoshar, the alleged ring-leader of the group and who was sentenced to death, recruited militants to carry out terrorist attacks "against Jewish and American interests."

The group allegedly plotted to bomb tourist and Christian pilgrimage sites, including the site of Jesus Christ's baptism near the River Jordan, during New Year's celebrations.

It said that other groups, also linked to Bin Laden, planned similar attacks in other countries, notably in the United

States.

State prosecutor Mahmud Obaidat, who demanded the death penalty, called the planned attacks an attempt to destabilise Jordan and also accused the militants of illegal possession of weapons and production of explosives.

Jordanian authorities said the group was linked with Bin Laden, a billionaire Saudi dissident believed to be living in Afghanistan who is wanted by the United States in connection with the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in Africa that killed more than 200 people.

123 killed as Tigers mount counter offensive in Jaffna

COLOMBO, Sept 18: Feroocious battles raged in northern Sri Lanka Monday as Tamil Tiger rebels launched a counter offensive in the Jaffna peninsula, leaving at least 123 dead on both sides, officials said, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) hit back as government troops captured the town of Chavakachcheri, the second largest town in the peninsula, the defence ministry said in a statement.

Ministry spokesman brigadier Sanath Karunaratne said troops had beaten back several rebel attempts overnight to dislodge security forces from Chavakachcheri.

He said at least 75 bodies of Tamil Tiger rebels were scattered in the area while 18 government

soldiers were killed in the latest bout of fighting. Another 20 soldiers were seriously wounded while 208 were treated for minor injuries, he said.

The army captured the Chavakachcheri on Sunday after a three-hour battle that cost the lives of four government troops and that of at least 26 rebels, defence officials said.

There was no immediate reaction from the rebels to the military claims.

The defence ministry said air force ground attack aircraft had bombed and destroyed four trucks where rebels were trying to transport hardware and reinforcements along the Jaffna coast at Sangupiddy.

Troops also captured a 15-year-old girl child soldier of the LTTE who is reported by the

defence ministry to have said that 30 of her colleagues were killed in a single attack near Chavakachcheri on Sunday.

Military officials said they were planning to return the bodies of at least 18 rebels to the Tamil Tigers through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

ICRC spokesman Harsha Gunawardena confirmed that the military was in contact with them to transfer the bodies across rebel lines and that the Tigers had agreed to take the remains of their colleagues.

However, Gunawardena said he could not comment on the numbers of bodies to be taken across until the transfer is completed on Tuesday in the Jaffna peninsula.

120 states pledge to step up fight to save children caught up in wars

WINNIPEG, Canada, Sept 18: Representatives of more than 120 governments, including more than 50 ministers, pledged here Sunday to step up the fight to save children caught up in wars, reports AFP.

But the agreement was immediately criticised by the honorary chair of the conference, Graca Machel, for not going far enough.

Machel, wife of former South African president Nelson Mandela and author of a detailed report for the United Nations on the plight of children caught up in wars, apologised as she turned to conference host, Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, saying: "I must express some disappointment."

Machel continued: "I may be

wrong, but I had the feeling that the message from this ministerial was not as strong as that from the youth and from the experts."

She was referring to two separate reports drawn up earlier in the week by youth delegates and representatives of volunteer groups and non-governmental organisations.

Both those groups wanted tough deadlines for imposing international bans on the use and abuse of children in war situations and tough sanctions against any government or group that violated those bans.

Axworthy appeared to suggest he shared Machel's disappointment, pointing out that "in meetings of governments, there has to be full agreement."



Pope John Paul II addresses masses of faithfuls on Sunday at the St. Peter's Square, Vatican City. Some 40,000 elderly faithful came to Vatican City to receive the Pope's blessing for the Jubilee of the Third Age.

--AFP photo

BRIEFLY

US, ROK hold missile talks:

The United States and South Korea held military talks here today in a bid to hammer out a deal which would put most of North Korea within range of the South's missiles, officials said, AFP reports from Seoul. Robert Einhorn, US assistant secretary of state for non-proliferation, headed the US team, while Song Min-Soon, director general of the foreign ministry's North American affairs, led the South Korean team. No official announcement was to be made on the talks. South Korea is seeking to increase its missile range ceiling of 180 km imposed under an agreement with the United States in 1979.

Blast rocks Belfast:

A bomb explosion early today heavily damaged the offices of a Protestant loyalist association here but caused no injuries, police said, AFP reports from Belfast. The blast was probably linked to rivalries between Protestant groups, they said. The explosion went off at 2:00 a.m. (7:00 BST) in front of the Loyalist Prisoners Aid association, a supporter of the paramilitary Ulster Defence Association (UDA), on Shankill Road. John White, the spokesman for the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), the political wing of the UDA, works out of that office. The attack took place several hours after the army defused a homemade bomb in the same neighbourhood. Police evacuated a nearby retirement home when they discovered the bomb during a routine sweep.

ROK starts work on railway link

IMJINGAK, South Korea, Sept 18: South Korea today started work on a rail link through the heavily fortified border to Communist Kim Dae-Jung declaring it would mark "the end of Cold War hostility and confrontation," reports AFP.

The president said the rebuilding of the main Seoul-Pyongyang line would be a new landmark in the peace process launched by his historic June summit with the North's supreme leader Kim Jong-Il.

VHP won't tolerate attacks on temples by Christian rebels

GUWAHATI, India, Sept 18: A hard-line Hindu group with close links to Indian premier Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP party vowed today it would "not tolerate" attacks on Hindu temples by Christian guerrillas in India's northeast, reports AFP.

The Hindu Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP - World Hindu Forum) said it would prevent separatist militants of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) from targeting Hindu temples and priests in the

region.

"We have decided to form a religion protection committee to save Hinduism from the onslaught of the pro-Christian NLFT," Sitaram Agarwal, general secretary of the VHP, said.

"We will not tolerate interference with our religious freedom."

Agarwal said the VHP's religion protection committee had already enlisted local Hindu villagers to guard temples and was mobilising public opinion against the separatist rebels.

"Despite repeated pleas, the government has not provided security to the Hindu population against militant attacks. The religion protection committee will be an alternative security arrangement for the people," said Agarwal.

The VHP alleged that in the last fortnight NLFT militants had killed a Hindu priest in Tripura state, and warned people against celebrating the biggest Hindu festival in the region, Durga Puja, in October.

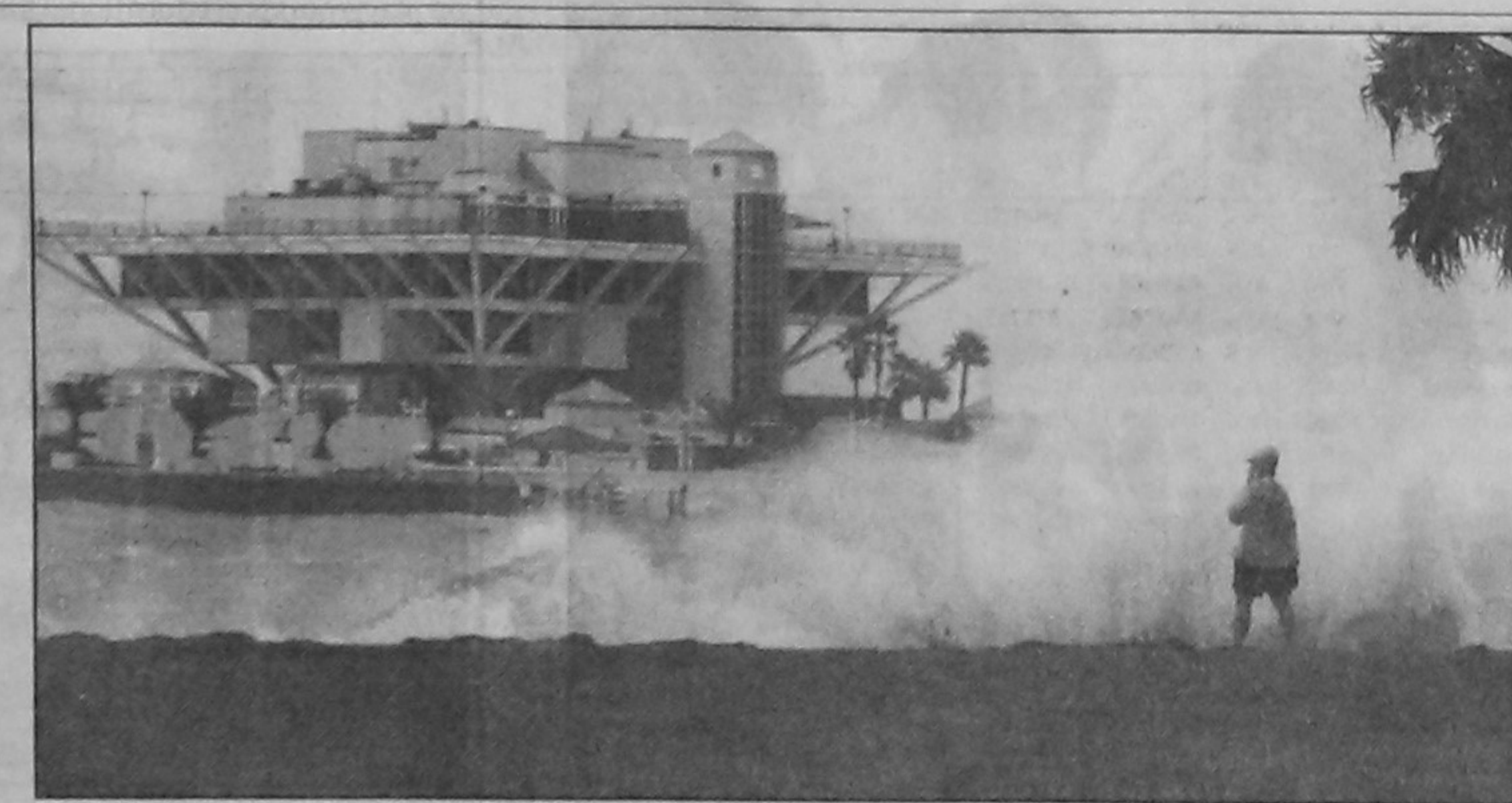
Gordon scours Florida coast

MIAMI, Sept 18: Torrential rain and heavy winds lashed northern Florida today as a weakening Gordon -- downgraded from hurricane to a tropical storm -- moved inland across the state, downing trees and power lines in its path, reports AFP.

The waning storm hit the peninsula late Sunday, prompting meteorologists to warn residents of possible tornadoes and floods.

At 2:00 a.m. (12:00 BST) the eye of the storm was about 50 km west-northwest of Gainesville, Florida according to the National Hurricane Center (NHC). Tropical storm force winds could be felt some 160 km from the centre of the storm.

Earlier Sunday the storm buffeted the tiny island of Cedar Key, just off the west coast of Florida, forcing residents to seek shelter.



High waves from Hurricane Gordon crash over a sea wall on Sunday at the St. Petersburg Pier in downtown St. Petersburg, Florida. Gordon, a category one hurricane, was likely to make landfall along Florida's western coast late Sunday. The National Hurricane Centre reported Gordon had sustained winds of 120kph (75mph). Coastal residents have been urged by officials to flee inland.

--AFP photo



A young girl holds the electoral programme of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) party as some 10,000 people gather at Nis' central square during an electoral campaign meeting of the G17 group on Sunday. G17 group is a group of Yugoslav economic experts who supports the campaign of the DOS in the upcoming Yugoslav presidential and parliamentary elections on September 24.

--AFP photo

Nagaland rebel leader freed from Thai prison

BANGKOK, Sept 18: Nagaland tribal rebel leader Thuingaleng Muivah has been released from a Thai prison, sources in his insurgent group said today, reports AFP.

"Our honourable Prime Minister, Mr. Th. Muivah, has been released from the Thai prison," said Timothy Kaping, foreign affairs secretary of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), Muivah's organisation.

Muivah, the NSCN general secretary, was arrested by Thai immigration officials in January

2000 at Bangkok airport.

The Naga separatist leader was arrested for trying to jump bail and attempting to enter Thailand with forged travel documents.

He had been appearing periodically in a Thai court to answer these charges and was next scheduled to appear on September 22.

While Muivah was incarcerated Indian officials and exiled Naga rebel leaders agreed in Bangkok to extend a ceasefire and help end a bloody 50-year insurgent drive.

Unease grows as troops fail to rescue hostages

Manila admits civilian deaths

MANILA, Sept 18: Unease was growing today as thousands of troops failed to locate 22 American, French, Malaysian and Filipino hostages being held in the southern Philippines, three days after a major operation was launched, reports AFP.

One expert warned that the campaign could last for months.

Officials have grudgingly admitted that the Abu Sayayf guerrillas have burrowed deep into familiar jungle to frustrate the attack in the remote island of Jolo, using the hostages as human shields.

The strike rode the crest of a wave of popular anger at a group which armed forces Chief of Staff General Angelo Reyes said "has

caused so much problems and embarrassment to the whole nation."

But market analysts said the support could crumble if the campaign gets bogged down. The attack failed to give a much-anticipated boost to the depressed stock market on Monday and the peso closed at a record low of 45.82 to the dollar.

Investors are in a wait-and-see mode because "there's some uncertainty on whether the hostages will survive or not, especially the foreign hostages," said Teresa Lee at Tower Securities Inc.

The assault "should be positive as finally we see action on the part of the government, but I think the uncertainty is to

whether the attack will be successful," said a currency trader at a foreign bank.

Several hundred demonstrators marched on the presidential palace Monday, in the first local display of opposition to Estrada's drastic attempt to end the nearly five-month-old hostage crisis.

Meanwhile, senior officials today admitted four civilians had died in a major attack on Muslim kidnappers in the southern Philippines, and emergency medical teams were being prepared in apparent expectation of many more casualties.

"We have four civilians confirmed killed," Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado told AFP, adding one was a child aged 11.

Atlantis undocks from ISS

WASHINGTON, Sept 18: The crew of the Space Shuttle Atlantis undocked from the International Space Station (ISS) late Sunday, in preparation for the craft's return to earth, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said, reports AFP.

Officials from mission control at the Johnson Space Centre in Houston Texas said the two vessels delinked just before midnight local time (10:00 BST).

Over the past 12 days the shuttle's seven-member crew loaded two tonnes of supplies onto the space station and undertook a six-hour space walk to install cables on the exterior of the station's Zvezda module, the ISS living quarters, in preparation for the arrival of the space station's first long-stay residents.

Vietnam flood death toll rises to 25

HANOI, Sept 18: Floods ravaging the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam have claimed 25 lives in the past few weeks, according to new figures released today by local authorities, reports AFP.

The worst floods to hit Vietnam in 40 years have killed 11 people in An Giang province and 14 in neighbouring Dong Thap and Long An, the three provinces to be the worst hit as the Mekong bursts its banks, said a local official.

He said he expected the toll would climb over the next few days as the waters continued to rise. Damage is now estimated at tens of millions of dollars.