

International

Vajpayee calls US trip 'extremely satisfying'

NEW DELHI, Sept 20 : Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee described his US visit as "extremely satisfying" but said India will not accept any curbs under the nuclear Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), Indian press reported today, says AFP.

Vajpayee, who returned to New Delhi late Tuesday, told accompanying reporters that there was now an "increasing convergence" of views between the United States and India on non-proliferation issues.

There was also a "greater appreciation of India's mature handling of its internal and external security," The Hindu quoted Vajpayee as saying.

The visit was extremely satisfying and it has served to consolidate the momentum of Indo-US relations.

The joint initiatives and the understandings reached repre-

sent a major step forward," Vajpayee said following his five-day official visit.

He said the two sides pledged to "listen with respect to each other and seek to accommodate our mutual concerns."

"Today, there is better understanding between the two on issues of mutual concern, specifically of threats posed by international terrorism and India's security perspective," he said.

Vajpayee said Washington recognised India's role as a factor of stability in South Asia and added: "We have also projected our willingness to shoulder our responsibility as a global player."

However, he said India will not be pressured to sign the global nuclear test ban treaty.

India will not accept any restrictions under the CTBT which could put shackles on taking sovereign decisions on

strategic matters," Vajpayee said, adding that New Delhi will sign the treaty only after a national consensus.

Both Washington and New Delhi said Vajpayee's visit, which followed Clinton's Indian trip in March helped forge a new era in ties, after years of mutual suspicion during the Cold War, when India banked on the Soviet Union.

However despite an array of economic and scientific agreements signed this year, some fundamental disagreements remain.

The United States is concerned about the threat of nuclear arms race in South Asia, after India conducted nuclear tests in 1998, which prompted Pakistan to follow suit.

Washington is also worried that another serious conflict could erupt over the divided region of Kashmir.

Meanwhile, the two sides agreed to step up cooperation in fighting terrorism, he told reporters.

"Some steps will be taken soon," Vajpayee said.

The issue is expected to figure

again in talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin during his October 2-5 trip to India.

Both Washington and New



South Korean Chairman Joint of Chiefs of Staff Cho Yong-Gil (R) and Henry H. Shelton (L), US Chairman of Chiefs of Staff, pose for photographers during the annual Military Committee Meeting (MCM) boosting mutual military cooperation between South Korea and US, at Seoul's Defence Ministry yesterday. The meeting is taking place ahead of the first ever meeting of defence ministers from North and South Korea next week

- AFP photo

Indo-Pak shelling continues

JAMMU, India, Sept 20 : Cross-border firing continued for the third day now in Kashmir, with India accusing Pakistan of launching an assault as cover for the infiltration of Islamic rebels, reports AFP.

Military officials here said three civilians, including a woman, were injured overnight by exploding mortar shells in the areas of Palanwala and Nowshera northwest of Indian Kashmir's winter capital of Jammu.

Army spokesman Major Sanjay Khanna in Jammu said at least 1,800 mortar shells had pounded Palanwala and Nowshera sectors since cross-border artillery shells escalated Monday.

Indian troops in the divided territory have also opened fire to silence the enemy guns, he said.

In New Delhi, a defence ministry spokesman accused Pakistan of starting the cross-border attacks.

"It is an old ploy. They (Pakistan) open fire on one sector and then infiltrate terrorists at another sector. The firing is also a cover for the militants to enter in Kashmir," the spokesman said.

He said the cross-border firing did not involve high-calibre artillery. "Ninety-nine percent of the shells are mortars."

"We are only retaliating to ensure that their guns are silenced" along the Line of Control that divides the Indian and

Pakistani zones, the spokesman said.

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

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

The two countries have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir since 1947.

The two South Asian adversaries came dangerously close to a fourth war last summer when India launched a full-scale military offensive to evict Pakistani-backed forces from the Kargil peaks of Kashmir.

Three more deaths occurred in

Flash floods in West Bengal: 10 killed

CALCUTTA, Sept 20 : Flash floods triggered by heavy rains claimed ten lives and affected nearly nine lakh people in three West Bengal districts with army and para-military forces swinging into action for rescue and relief work as rail links between Calcutta and Assam snapped, reports PTI.

Deputy Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee told newsmen at the state secretariat yesterday that seven persons died in Birbhum district.

Three more deaths occurred in Bardhaman district.

General Henry Shelton, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs staff, headed a high-level military delegation to the security conference at the office of his South Korean counterpart, Cho Young-Kil.

The allies will have high-level talks Thursday, attended by US

US, ROK reaffirm alliance

SEOUL, Sept 20 : The United States and South Korea put on a show of military unity today as the two Koreas also started security talks in a bid to ease tensions on the heavily armed border.

Top US and South Korean officers "reaffirmed their traditional military alliance at their annual security conference which started today here," a South Korean military official told AFP.

General Henry Shelton, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs staff, headed a high-level military delegation to the security conference at the office of his South Korean counterpart, Cho Young-Kil.

The allies will have high-level talks Thursday, attended by US

Defence Secretary William Cohen and South Korean Defence Minister Cho Sung-Tae.

Cho's office said the agenda for Thursday's talks would cover the growing inter-Korean reconciliation, the state of North Korea's military and the combined defence alliance of US and South Korean troops.

The two sides will also discuss ways to curb growing anti-American sentiment in South Korea since the two Koreas agreed at a milestone summit in June to ease tensions on the divided peninsula.

Seoul wants Washington to take quick steps to curb crime by US troops and environmental pollution from US bases.

As the generals met, inter-

Korean talks started in the border truce village of Panmunjom to arrange details of the first meeting of defence ministers from North and South Korea next week.

Generals from North and South Korea held their first direct meeting in Panmunjom in the demilitarised zone, which has divided the peninsula since the 1950-53 Korean War.

The defence ministers will meet on the southern island of Cheju from September 25 for the most important talks since the inter-Korean summit.

South Korea considers the military talks a key step toward formally ending the war, which was only halted with an armistice.

Cuban plane crashes in sea: 9 rescued

MIAMI, Sept 20 : Nine survivors were picked up Tuesday after a small plane carrying at least 10 people from Cuba plunged into the Gulf of Mexico in mysterious circumstances, US officials said.

Wreckage of the small single-engined plane was found floating in the sea by a Panamanian-registered cargo ship some 100 km west of Cuba, and 300 km south of Florida's Key West, the officials said.

A report from Cuba alerting US aviation authorities to a hijacking earlier in the day sparked a major US air and sea search operation.

Security beefed up in Islamabad

ISLAMABAD, Sept 20 : Police and intelligence agencies stepped up security in the Pakistani capital today one day after a bomb blast in a crowded market killed 16 people and wounded many others, officials said, reports AFP.

"Security has been strengthened throughout the city and vital installations and sensitive points are being kept under strict vigilance," a senior administration official said.

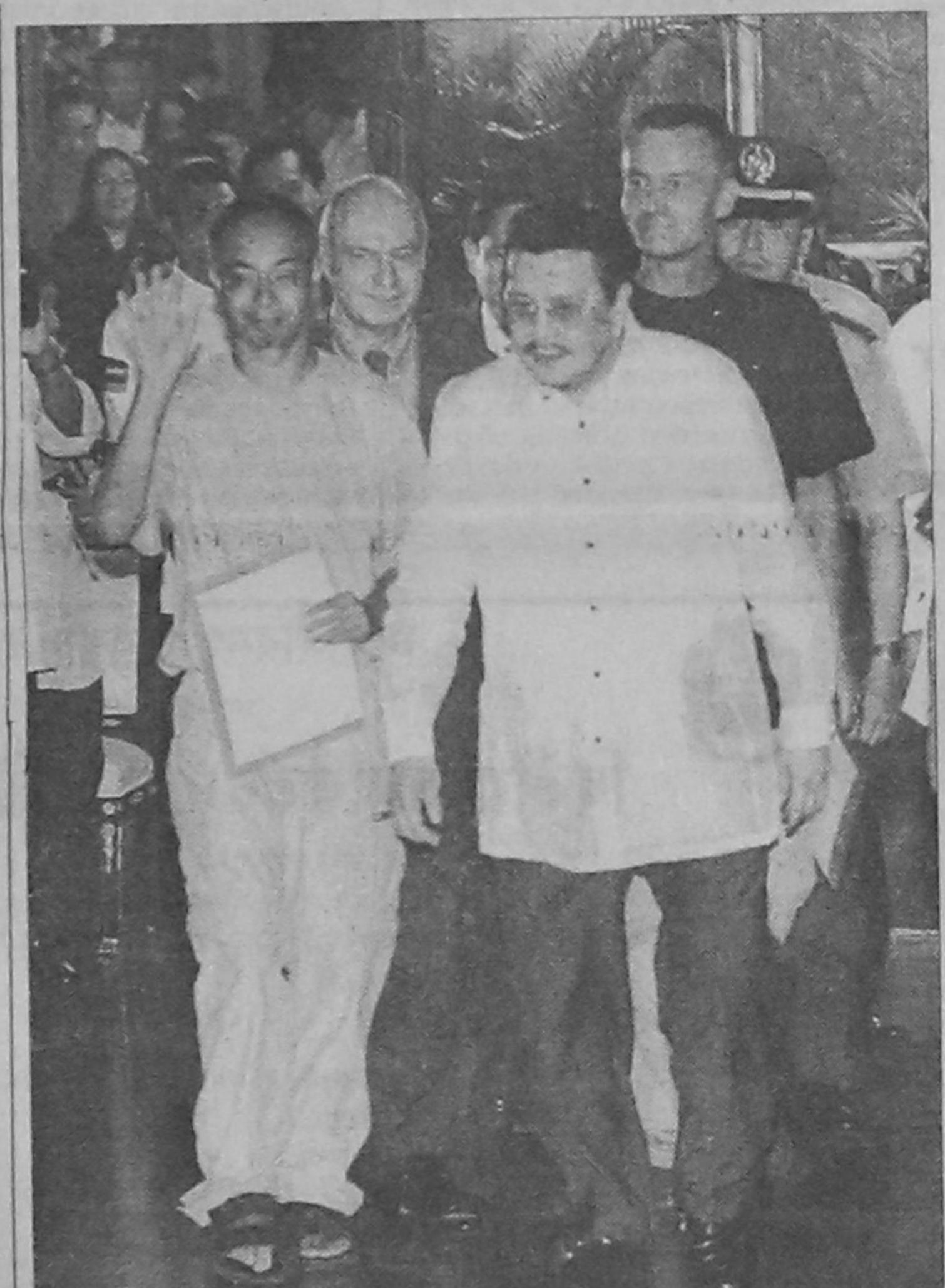
The blast in an Islamabad fruit and vegetable market on Tuesday was the first in the Pakistani capital since military ruler General Pervez Musharraf seized power in a coup October last year.

The bomb exploded in a fruit crate during the morning rush at the market, killing 16 and injuring around 80 people, mostly traders.

Anti-Taliban troops retake town

KABUL, Sept 20 : Afghan opposition forces flushed out Taliban troops from Imam Saheb town in Kunduz province bordering Tajikistan after heavy overnight fighting, the anti-Taliban alliance said today, reports AFP.

Fighting erupted after soldiers of the Taliban regime entered the town, vacated earlier by the opposition in a tactical move by commander Ahmad Shah Masood to snare the ruling militia, opposition spokesman Mohammad Habib said.



Philippines President Joseph Estrada (front R) and Roland Madura (former hostage) waving (L) walk along with France Ambassador Gilles Chouraqui (second L) and Jean-Jacques Le Garrec, (second R also a former hostage) at the Malacanang Palace before their press conference in Manila yesterday. - AFP photo

French hostages celebrate freedom, Estrada vows to crush Abu Sayyaf

MANILA, Sept 20 : Philippine President Joseph Estrada, buoyed by the escape of two French hostages from their Abu Sayyaf captors, vowed today to crush the Muslim rebels "and reduce them to ash," reports AFP.

The escape of Jean-Jacques Le Garrec and Roland Madura was a major boost to the president, who launched a high-risk military assault last Saturday to rescue the Frenchmen and 17 other hostages in the face of strong protests from France.

French President Jacques Chirac said he had expressed to Estrada "the thanks of France."

Estrada, who appeared at a press conference with the pair, said he had ordered the military to intensify its attack on the southern island of Jolo.

"We cannot stop here, there are still 17 hostages to go," he said. "We shall continue to pursue the Abu Sayyaf criminals and secure the safety of the remaining hostages."

The Frenchmen, held on July 9 while trying to interview other hostages, said they slipped away from their captors Tuesday night under cover of darkness. But they said the assault had forced the Abu Sayyaf to leave their hideouts and to travel at night, creating the conditions for their escape.

Le Garrec thanked Estrada for

taking the "very, very difficult decision" to order an assault.

Only seven Abu Sayyaf members have so far been reported killed and 20 captured despite a ground and air bombardment of the tropical island and a search by some 4,000 troops.

While the attack assisted the escape of the Frenchmen and helped flush out the Muslim rebels, there were indications that civilians may have paid a heavy price for it.

More than 600 Jolo residents have fled their island by coastguard boat and one said that at least 10 civilians have been killed during the military assault.

Other villagers who were ferried to the southern city of Zamboanga told of heavy fighting, "explosions like thunder" and almost constant bombardment as the military attacked the Abu Sayyaf kidnappers.

The military has barred journalists from travelling to the island. The official casualty toll for civilians is four.

Military chief General Angelo Reyes said Estrada's orders were firstly to secure the safety of the hostages and secondly, "to destroy the Abu Sayyaf."

The instruction of the president is to do it as fast as possible," he added.

Black hole plays with stars like toys

PARIS, Sept 20 : In the centre of the Milky Way lurks a "supermassive" black hole, whose mighty gravitational force sucks in light and plays with three nearby stars as if they were toys, reports AFP.

The hole, Sagittarius A, is located 26,000 light-years from Earth at the exact point around which our galaxy seems to revolve, astronomers report in Thursday's issue of Nature, the

British scientific weekly.

The existence of Sgr A, to use the hole's shortened name, has been suspected for some time thanks to faint radiation emissions from a cloud of gas and cosmic dust believed to be revolving around its maw.

But until now supporting

evidence to pinpoint the phenomenon has been lacking.

The missing link appears to

have been provided by ultra-fast images taken by the 10-metre Keck telescope on Hawaii, one of the biggest telescopes in the world, according to a team from the Department of Physics and Astronomy, at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

Taken over four years, the images show three stars orbiting close to Sgr A to be accelerating under its gravitational influence.

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US space shuttle Atlantis lands in Florida

WASHINGTON, Sept 20 : The US space shuttle Atlantis landed early this morning at the Kennedy Space Centre near Cape Canaveral, Florida, ending a successful mission to refurbish the International Space Station, reports AFP.

The five astronauts and two cosmonauts landed safely after their 12-day mission, highlighted by a six-hour space walk to install cables and a global positioning system to help the space station position itself with respect to the North Pole.

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Military chief General Angelo Reyes said Estrada's orders were firstly to secure the safety of the hostages and secondly, "to destroy the Abu Sayyaf."

The instruction of the president is to do it as fast as possible," he added.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office announced Tuesday that a meeting between negotiators had been cancelled and the government was declaring a "time-out,"

An Israeli minister blamed the about-face on a misunderstanding.

The five were killed during a 20 minute exchange of fire between a joint military and police patrol and a group of armed men in Blang Nibong village, in the Samudera sub-district on Tuesday, said North Aceh Police chief Superintendent Abadan Bangko. But local residents denied there had been a gunfight.

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