

International

West warns Milosevic not to use force to cling to power

BELGRADE, Sept 26 : Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, with apparent electoral defeat staring him in the face, was warned by the West Tuesday not to try to use force to hang on to power, reports AFP.

Britain led Western insistence that Milosevic should not use strong arm tactics to cling to the presidency. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook reminded him that western powers still have "a continuing and significant military presence" in the Balkans.

Unofficial results from more than half the polling stations in Serbia showed Milosevic had been soundly defeated by opposition candidate Vojislav Kostunica, he said in Brighton where he was attending a British Labour Party conference.

"He (Milosevic) cannot go on in power with any credibility or with

any authority other than use of naked power," Cook told Sky News television.

He hinted that western troops carrying out peacekeeping operations in Kosovo could be mobilised against Serbia if Milosevic launched any military action.

"He has already dragged the poor people of Serbia into four separate wars and lost every one of them. He now should recognise that he should go, and should go with the minimum violence and the maximum opportunity to get out as quickly as he can."

Cook's comments came after a Brussels-based thinktank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), warned that Milosevic would at least seek a run-off vote against opposition candidate Kostunica and might even try to engineer a crisis to cling on to power.

"He would give himself a two-

week lifeline to engineer at least something, either to give himself a better chance to steal the ballot or - perhaps more likely - to do something that will enable him to create a crisis, a state of emergency, and call off the whole process," said ICG president Gareth Evans.

With both the Milosevic regime and the opposition claiming victory in Sunday's elections, western governments say they have evidence of widespread ballot-rigging by Milosevic's officials.

But former Greek foreign minister Karolos Papoulias, who went to Yugoslavia as a private observer, said the vote had been carried out in "an impeccable manner".

"Those who had announced widespread fraud, like (EU foreign policy and security chief) Javier Solana, have been proved

wrong," he said.

"What is certain is that the (ruling) Socialists have suffered a heavy defeat in (Serbian) municipal elections," he said, adding that the presidential contest was heading without doubt for a second round.

Despite the lack of official results, Kostunica supporters felt confident enough of victory to begin celebrating late Monday.

More than 40,000 of his supporters packed Belgrade's central Square of the Republic, waving party and Serbian flags shouting "He is Finished" and "Victory!" to the rhythms of drum troupes which have become a trademark of anti-Milosevic rallies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also moved into line with Western leaders in accepting that Milosevic was facing defeat, the Russian press said Tuesday.

UN divided over response to flights to Iraq

Jordan prepares to send plane to Baghdad: FM

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 26 : The UN committee overseeing sanctions against Iraq on Monday was unable to agree about an appropriate response to flights to Baghdad, the committee president, Dutch ambassador Peter van Walsum, said, reports AFP.

"There was no agreement," van Walsum said, noting the 15 committee members discussed for more than two hours the recent French and Russian landings in Baghdad and those expected in the near future.

Van Walsum said, "My view was that there was no consensus for a change of practice, so I felt that I should continue the existing practice" of requiring committee authorization for all flights to Iraq.

The committee members, who represent the permanent seats of the UN Security Council, are

profoundly divided over the legality of the flights to Baghdad.

Britain and the United States maintain that committee authorisation is necessary, while France believes that since the United Nations resolutions do not impose an aerial embargo, a simple notification is sufficient.

France on Monday submitted a proposal to change the committee's practice, in place since the 1990 Gulf War, when the UN imposed a severe course of sanctions against Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait.

Meanwhile, Jordan is preparing to send a plane to Baghdad with Cabinet ministers and parliamentarians on board, Foreign Minister Abdel Ilah al-Khatib told AFP today.

"Jordan is making the necessary preparations to send a Jordanian plane to Baghdad," Khatib

said.

"Jordanian officials, cabinet ministers and parliamentarians will be on board the aircraft," Khatib said.

He did not give a specific date for the flight but government sources said it will take place within 48 hours.

Prime Minister Ali Abu Ragheb could travel to Iraq after the flight, government sources said.

A cabinet minister last week told AFP that Abu Ragheb could travel soon to Iraq, becoming the first head of government to go to Baghdad in nearly a decade.

The flight will crown efforts by Jordan to ease the 10-year-old UN embargo on neighbouring Iraq and follows an official request by Amman for the United Nations to permit the resumption of air links with Iraq.

Jordan's queen gives birth to baby girl

AMMAN, Sept 26 : Jordan's Queen Rania gave birth early today to a baby girl called Salma, the third child of the world's youngest queen and her husband King Abdullah II, palace sources told AFP.

Both mother and child are doing well, the sources said, adding that the baby was born at 2:22 a.m. (5:22 BST Monday), the sources said rather than 2:30 a.m. as initially reported.

Salma weighed 3.3 kilograms (seven pounds) when she was born at the Hussein Medical City in Amman.



A villager walks past a submerged portion of a railway track in the flood-affected area of Katwa, some 150 km north of Calcutta on Tuesday. Over five hundred people have died and around a million people rendered homeless in the floods caused by incessant rains in West Bengal.

—AFP photo

Separatist violence claims 22 more lives in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Sept 26 : Separatist-linked violence in Indian Kashmir has killed 22 people, including 13 Muslim militants, a police spokesman said today, reports AFP.

In one incident three members of the police counter-insurgency Special Operation Group were killed, along with a police informer, overnight Monday when militants ambushed them in Kupwara district, 100 km north of the Kashmiri summer capital, Srinagar.

Four Indian soldiers were injured in the ambush, the spokesman said, adding that all the militants had managed to escape.

In another encounter in Wandorodur village, also in Kupwara, security forces gunned down two militants identified as members of the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen outfit.

The spokesman said four more militants and an Indian soldier were killed in a shootout in Chiti village in Bandipore district, 60

km north of Srinagar. Six residential houses were destroyed in a fire that broke out in the village during the fighting.

Another four Muslim militants and an Indian border guard were killed Tuesday morning in a fierce encounter at Wangund, in the southern Kashmir district of Anantnag, the spokesman said, adding that the shooting was "still on".

A policeman, three militants and two civilians were killed in other isolated incidents across the Kashmir valley.

India retests surface-to-air missile

NEW DELHI, Sept 26 : India today successfully retested the surface-to-air Trishul (Trident) missile from a ship off the country's southern coast, the Press Trust of India reported, says AFP.

The test was carried out at a firing range in the eastern state of Orissa.

Officials said it was fired from a mobile launcher and was supposed to hit a dummy object attached to a Pilotless Target Aircraft.

The multi-role Trishul has a range of up to nine kilometres (5.5 miles) with a payload capacity of 15 kilograms (33 pounds). The Trishul has been flight-tested more than 10 times since 1983. A version is being developed for the army.

India has an ambitious programme to build a full rack of guided missiles including the ballistic missile series Agni (Fire), which can carry nuclear warheads.

India to set up body to probe corruption

GUWAHATI, India, Sept 26 : India is setting up a high-level commission to probe corruption allegations against politicians and bureaucrats in the country's northeastern states, official sources said today, reports AFP.

A top federal Home Ministry official said a retired Supreme Court judge would head the commission investigating charges that political leaders and senior civil servants have been siphoning off government funds.

"The commission will come into effect very soon and it is expected to unravel a very big corruption racket in the north-eastern states," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The commission is also expected to look at other charges that some government funds have found their way into the pockets of separatist militant groups operating in the region.

India's northeast consists of seven states -- known as the "Seven Sisters" -- joined to the rest of the country by a thin strip of land and bordered by Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar.

Double agent testifies in Lockerbie trial

CAMP ZEIST, Netherlands, Sept 26 : The trial of two Libyans charged with the Lockerbie bombing continued today with keenly awaited testimony from a Libyan agent turned CIA informer, reports AFP.

Abdul Majid Giaka, 40, is said to be able to directly link the accused to the bomb that blew Pan American Flight 103 out of the sky over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988, killing 270 people.

Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, 48, and Al-Amin Khalifa Fhimah, 44, have both pleaded not guilty to putting a suitcase concealing the bomb onto a flight out of Malta, tagged for transfer in London onto New York-bound Pan Am Flight 103.

Majid, appearing behind a curtain that concealed his face from the public gallery, began his testimony -- due to last several days -- by answering questions about his identity and education.

He spoke in Arabic, with simultaneous translation into English.

Iran sought secret talks with Israel

JERUSALEM, Sept 26 : High-ranking Iranian officials tried last year to launch secret talks with Israel, Tehran's arch-enemy, but were rebuffed by the Jewish state, former Israeli foreign minister David Levy was quoted as saying today, reports AFP.

"Sources close to the Iranian government tried several times last year to engage in a secret dialogue with Israel," Levy told the daily Yediot Aharonot, adding that he had "categorically rejected the idea because nothing good would have come out of it."

It would have put Israel in an undesirable and difficult situation with regard to the United States, which accuses Iran of supporting terrorism and operates a unilateral economic embargo against it.

Lankan troops mount fresh offensive

COLOMBO, Sept 26 : Sri Lankan troops mounted a fresh land and air offensive against Tamil Tiger rebels today, resulting in at least 30 people dead on both sides, the defence ministry said, reports AFP.

Security forces backed by artillery guns and air craft captured an area of about 10 square km in the northern peninsula of Jaffna after Tuesday's brief offensive, the ministry said in a statement.

It said 13 government soldiers were killed and 4 others wounded and placed rebel casualties at 17 fighters killed and many more wounded.



Bernard De-Montferrand (L) head of European Union during a meeting with senior separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani (C) and Prof Abdul Gani Bhat (R), chairman of the All Parties Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference (APHC) in Srinagar on Monday. The French-led troika of European ambassadors, together with the European Commission envoy in New Delhi, arrived in the troubled Indian state of Kashmir on a fact-finding mission.

—AFP photo

GODAVRI (Nepal), Sept 26 : Sino India relations are improving fast and New Delhi should not be worried about Beijing's limited arms sales to Islamabad, former Chinese ambassador to India Cheng Rulseng has said, reports PTI.

India need not worry about limited arms sales to Pakistan by China in view of India's huge military procurement, Cheng told an international seminar on defence here in the Lalitpur district of Nepal.

The present Chinese help to Pakistan is much less and "limited" compared to the earlier one, he told the seminar on defence, technology and cooperative security in South Asia, organised by the Colombo based regional centre for strategic studies.

India and China have matured enough to handle the bilateral issues and relations between the two neighbours are improving fast in recent years through friendly exchanges at all levels, said Cheng, currently Deputy Director of Chinese centre for international studies, Beijing.

On the boundary question, he said the signing of the agreement

on the maintenance of peace and tranquility along the line of control in 1993 and the agreement on confidence building measures in the military field along the line of actual control in 1996 showed that both sides adopted a practical and flexible policy on the issue.

These two agreements created favourable conditions for the final settlement of the boundary question and offered a new model of cooperative security in Asia, Cheng said.

The former Chinese ambassador to India said both India and China could be natural allies in world affairs as both have identical views on many international issues, like intervention in Kosovo by western forces or expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

On the Kashmir issue, Cheng said Beijing could not do much except telling Pakistan and India to bilaterally solve their problems.

Confrontation between India and Pakistan was exploited by the major outside powers for their own interests, seriously threatening peace and security in the region, he said.

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Sept 26 : The Palestinians would be willing to accept a delay of "months" in reaching a peace deal if Israel carries out a further withdrawal from the West Bank and releases more prisoners, an official said today, reports AFP.

"If we don't reach a final agreement in a short time, since everything is blocked on Jerusalem, we would agree to a delay of months to enable a new US president to settle into office," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"We will only agree to this if Israel carries out the third redeployment ... and releases a good number of prisoners," the official added.

He was speaking the day after a summit between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Prime Minister Ehud Barak that paved the way for a new round of US-led talks aimed at breaking the deadlock in the peace process.

The two sides missed a September 13 deadline for a peace deal, with negotiations blocked over the key issue of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees.

The official was referring to the so-called third phase redeployment from the West Bank called for under the 1993 Oslo peace

accords. He said Israel should hand over full control to the Palestinians of areas where they currently have administrative powers but Israel retains security control, in particular Arab neighbourhoods around Jerusalem.

The Palestinians currently have full or partial control over some 40 percent of the West Bank and 65 percent of the Gaza Strip.

Israel has released some 400 Palestinians since September last year but still holds 1,650 what it terms "security prisoners."

Meanwhile, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators left for Washington today where the United States is to lead a further round of talks to push forward peacemaking, Israeli radio reported.

The latest US push follows a summit between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, which one senior Israeli official told the radio was "the best they had ever had."

However, no breakthrough was reported by either side as a result of the meeting, which was their first encounter since the US-hosted Camp David summit broke down without agreement two months ago.

Putin's envoy holds talks with Pakistani FM

ISLAMABAD, Sept 26 : A special envoy of Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived here Tuesday for talks with Pakistani leaders on bilateral relations and the situation in Afghanistan, officials said, reports AFP.

Sergei Yastrzhembsky met with Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar and held wide ranging talks focussing on "bilateral relations and regional and global issues of common concern," officials said.

The envoy is also expected to meet with Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider before calling on military ruler General Pervez Musharraf to deliver a message from Putin, they said.

The contents of the message were not revealed but press reports said it related to the situation in war-torn Afghanistan.

The visit of Yastrzhembsky, described here as "an important

contributor to Russian foreign policy making," is the first by a senior Russian official since Musharraf took power after ousting prime minister Nawaz Sharif's government in a military coup in October last year.

It also follows Putin's meeting with Musharraf on the sidelines of the UN Millennium Summit in New York earlier this month.

Sattar told reporters on Monday the Russian envoy's visit would "give opportunity to the two sides to have exchange of views on matters of bilateral concern."

The foreign minister said Pakistan, keen to iron out differences with Russia, would try to ally Moscow's concern on Afghanistan.

"We can respond to Russian concerns in the context of Pakistan only," he added.

Blair to rally Labour faithful for polls

BRIGHTON, England, Sept 26 : British Prime Minister Tony Blair was preparing today to rally the Labour faithful for the electoral fight ahead after fending off revolts over pensions and fuel, reports AFP.

Despite his worst month in power culminating in an unprecedented nosedive in the polls, he was expected to send the party into effective election mode, warning of "a real fight to be had over the future direction of Britain."

The fightback began Monday when finance minister Gordon Brown took to the rostrum in a stirring defence of the government's handling of the economy.

Rejecting calls for quick fixes to ease the pain of high fuel prices and stagnating pensions, the chancellor of the exchequer pledged never to return to the "old short-termism" of the past.

His bombastic performance, after he had come under fire over his response to the concerns of pensions and fuel protesters, earned Brown a long standing ovation and a kiss from his new wife.

North, S Korea agree to end risk of war

CHEJU, South Korea, Sept 26 : The South and North Korean defence ministers agreed on the need to "eliminate the danger of war" on the Korean peninsula during landmark talks today, reports AFP.

South Korea's Defence Minister Cho Sung-Tae and the North's Armed Forces Minister Vice Marshall Kim Il-Chol took symbolic steps toward a permanent peace during the first meeting of defence chiefs from the rivals since the division of Korea in 1945 and the 1950-53 Korean War.

"The two sides share the view that it is important for both sides to ease military tension, eliminate the danger of war and help a permanent peace take root," said a joint statement released at the end of the two days of talks.

The meeting on the resort island of Cheju also agreed to start talks next month on restoring a road and rail link through the heavily-fortified border. The ministers will meet again in North Korea in mid-November.

No peace treaty to formally end the Korean War has been signed and these talks were the most important since the historic June summit between President Kim Dae-Jung and the North's supreme leader Kim Jong-Il which produced a declaration to seek eventual reunification.

The North's minister later flew to Seoul and met Kim Dae-Jung before returning to Pyongyang. The president's office, however, gave no details.

Though no concrete measures to end persisting hostilities were announced, the president and

South Korean army chiefs hailed the talks as a major step forward.

"It is quite significant that the defence ministers of both sides have met and agreed to give military support to implementing the joint North-South Declaration," Cho told journalists before a farewell lunch with Kim Il-Chol.

"It is also very important that the two sides agreed to make joint efforts to ease military tension and guarantee peace on the Korean peninsula," the minister added.

Cho highlighted last week that amidst the dramatic change in relations, military hostility remained at a high level. The United States, which has 37,000 troops in South Korea, has called for the North to make a military gesture to show it is sincere about reconciliation.

TV black out in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Sept 26 : Millions of television sets in the Indian capital went blank today as cable operators launched a strike against a government ban on tobacco and liquor commercials and sleazy films, reports AFP.

Rakesh Datta, a top functionary of New Delhi's Cable Operators' United Front, said "millions of television sets" had been affected in the capital since the strike began at the stroke of midnight.

"We are protesting against the government's participation in engineering the collapse of the cable industry," Datta said.

Another official said the three-day strike could be extended and

enforced in other parts of the country.

Information and Broadcasting Minister Arun Jaitley, who early this month banned surrogate advertisements of items banned by the new cable TV law including tobacco, cigarettes and alcohol and the airing of "adult films" denounced the strike.

Calling it a "hartal" (strike) based on imaginary fears, Jaitley urged cable operators to resume services immediately.

The code, which came into force about two weeks ago, also prohibits advertisements promoting synthetic baby food which results in the reduction of breast feeding, and bans programmes or

ads which may "hurt religious sentiments."

It provides for stern measures against cable operators violating local copyright laws in a bid to stem massive losses of revenue for the domestic entertainment industry, which is plagued by rampant piracy.

"We are a liberal society. We will ban (cable operators) only in the rarest of rare cases. Power to ban any channel is only with the central government, Jaitley said.

Cable operators argue that they should "not be made to suffer" if overseas satellite television networks beam programmes to India that contravene the new code in some way.

BRIEFLY

Lightning kills 7 in China: Lightning struck a group of villagers gathering herbs in central China, killing seven of them and injuring four, a local government spokesman said Tuesday, AP reports from Shanghai.

The accident occurred Sunday afternoon on the outskirts of Ezhou, a city in Hubei province, said the Ezhou city spokesman, who gave only his surname, Zhou.

5 more killed in Maluku: At least five people were killed and eight others injured in an attack by Muslims Tuesday on a Christian village in Ambon, capital of Indonesia's restive Maluku islands, a church worker said, AFP reports from Jakarta.

The Muslim attackers were aided by soldiers during the attack on the village of Hative Besar, said Sammy Welleruni of the Christian coordinating post at the Maranatha church in Ambon. Welleruni said all the dead were Christians.

MILF kills 7 in Philippines: Muslim separatist guerrillas killed seven people including five children in an attack on a home in the southern Philippines, the local military spokesman said Tuesday, AFP reports from Zamboanga.

Ten guerrillas of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) barged into the house of Fernin Inoc on Monday near the town of Tangkal, shooting him, four of his children, and a visiting relative and their child, Colonel Hilario Atendido said.



Some 80 immigrants gather at San Jose Church in Almeria on Monday for the sixth day to protest against the rejections to stay in Spain.

—AFP photo