

International

UN condemns ME violence as US abstains

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 8: With the United States abstaining, the UN Security Council has voted to condemn the "excessive use of force" against Palestinians, who suffered some 80 dead in clashes with Israelis, reports Reuters.

The other 14 council members voted in favour of the unanimously negotiated resolution on Saturday after three days of nearly all-night talks between US envoys, Palestinian supporters and an intervention by President Bill Clinton.

The resolution condemned the "excessive use of force against the Palestinians, resulting in injury and loss of human life." And it implicitly blamed Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon for provoking the weeklong rioting when he visited a shrine on Sept. 28 in Jerusalem's Old City, holy to both Muslims and Jews.

Neither Israel nor Sharon are mentioned by name, a concession to the United States, but its implication is clear and one reason the United States abstained, diplomats said.

The document, initiated by the Palestinians, also called for an immediate resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and supported "a speedy and objective inquiry" into the violence, without saying who should conduct the probe.

"The United States does not think it was a very good resolution, to put it mildly," US Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke told reporters

after the vote.

"It was one-sided. It did not reflect the fact that Israelis had been killed and wounded, that this is not spontaneous and many of the things going on have a deliberateness about them," Holbrooke said.

But he said the decision to abstain rather than to kill the resolution with a veto was made at the "highest levels" of the US government after changes were made because of the "great dangers that exist in the region today."

Malaysia led council members belonging to the 114-member Non-Aligned Movement of developing nations in pressing for condemnation of Israel over the past week. The resolution was also sponsored by Bangladesh, Jamaica, Mali, Namibia, Tunisia and Ukraine.

Fears mounted that a US veto of the resolution would only exacerbate the violence among the Palestinians and their supporters in Lebanon and elsewhere.

However, Nasser al-Kidwa, the Palestinian UN observer, said the document "could help alleviate the gravity on the ground and hopefully help bring the situation under control."

The United States had tried to head off the resolution, saying council action would interfere with efforts to try to end the bloodshed and salvage the Middle East peace process.



Israeli soldiers gear-up at the Israeli-Lebanese border on Saturday. The Israeli army has sent in a special commando unit to the northern border and put them on a state of alert following the kidnapping of three of its soldiers by Lebanese Islamic guerrillas in an ambush in the occupied area of Shebaa Farms. --AFP photo

Kostunica takes charge of battered Yugoslavia

BELGRADE, Oct 8: Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica started his first full day in office today, taking charge of a nation economically crippled and internationally isolated after 13 tumultuous years of rule by Slobodan Milosevic, reports Reuters.

Kostunica, a 56-year constitutional lawyer, took power late on Saturday at a joint session of parliament that ended an historic shift towards democracy for Yugoslavia.

"Everything is peaceful and Yugoslavia and Serbia had joined the community of democratic nations," an exhausted but elated Kostunica said in a brief statement to assembled lawmakers and dignitaries.

The West promised to help the new president and the European Union is likely to announce on Monday that it will lift some of the sanctions that have throttled Yugoslavia's economy.

Saturday's simple swearing-in ceremony ended two weeks of high drama, which saw Milosevic

thrown out of office by a wave of public protests after he had desperately tried to cling to power despite losing last month's presidential elections.

A big question mark hung over Milosevic's future.

The former Yugoslav strongman has said he wants to carry on in politics, while the West wants him extradited to face charges rising out of the Kosovo conflict. He was indicted along with four other officials of his leadership for alleged war crimes against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.

Kostunica has said he will not hand Milosevic over to the UN war crimes tribunal in the Hague and on Saturday said he had other things to worry about than his predecessor's fate.

He stated that his first priority would be improving relations between Yugoslavia's two remaining republics, Serbia and Montenegro, which have been pushed to breaking point by Milosevic's hardline, nationalist

rule.

He also said Yugoslavia needed to strengthen its sovereignty over Kosovo, a message bound to infuriate the province's majority ethnic Albanians, who are pushing for independence.

"There will be many economic difficulties and political hardships ahead," he warned.

In Belgrade, thoughts of future problems were set aside as thousands of people still milled through the streets, visiting the sites of last Thursday's revolt when crowds stormed the federal parliament building and state television offices.

Kostunica, a moderate nationalist who galvanised Serbia's fragmented opposition parties for the September 24 presidential poll, told Reuters Television he was relieved that he had ousted Milosevic without a bloodbath.

European leaders, who last year backed NATO's successful fight to kick Serb forces out of Kosovo, said they do what they could to help Belgrade.



Yugoslav President-elect Vojislav Kostunica (C) shakes hands with members of the Yugoslav Parliament during his oath-taking ceremony in the Sava Centre in Belgrade on Saturday. On right is his wife Zorica Radovic. Kostunica took the oath of office as Yugoslavia's first popularly-elected president before a joint sitting of Parliament, bringing the curtain down on 13 years of iron rule by Slobodan Milosevic. --AFP photo

Lankan polls campaign ends

Opposition warns of Yugoslav-style uprising

COLOMBO, Oct 8: Sri Lanka parties have ended a blood-soaked campaign that killed 60 people as the main opposition today warned of Yugoslav-style uprising if the government tried to rig Tuesday's crucial parliamentary polls, reports AFP.

The main opposition United National Party (UNP) said that violence had escalated in the past 48 hours raising fears of attacks against voters and candidates in areas unfavourable to the ruling party.

The private centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) said that 58 people had been killed in poll-related violence since the campaign began five weeks ago and there had been a total of 1,473 violent incidents reported to them.

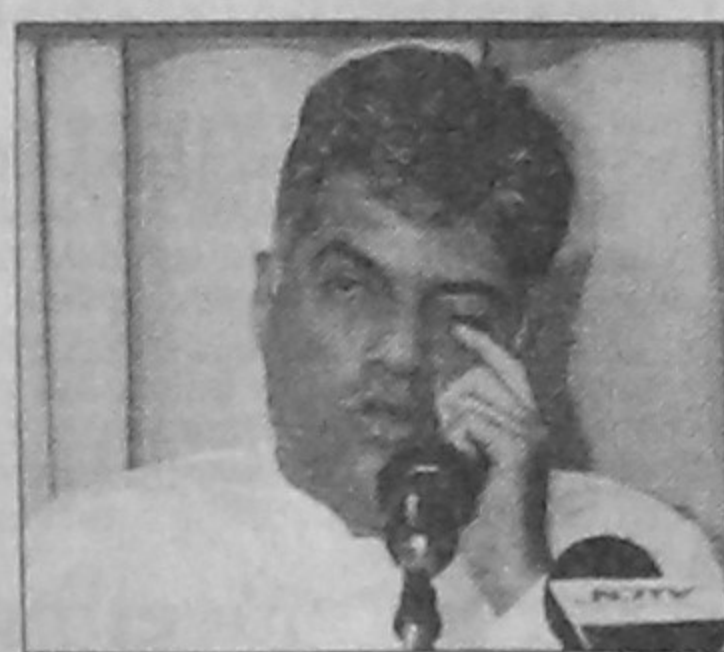
Police said crowd turn out for the final election rallies on Saturday night was poor due to fears that the separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas may stage suicide bomb attacks.

"It was the fear of bomb attacks that kept people off the meetings," a senior police officer here said adding that the rallies, however, had ended peacefully.

The Marxist JVP, or people's Liberation Front, said they feared the government may resort to "dirty tricks" in the next two days to discourage their supporters from going to the polling booths.

"The government is desperate that we are making a significant impact," said JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva.

"They are already concocting false allegations so that we will have little time to counter them."



Sri Lankan opposition United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe gestures during a press conference in Colombo yesterday following the end of campaigning ahead of nation-wide parliamentary elections tomorrow. --AFP photo

The JVP warned, however, that they would bring people to the streets to protest if the government tried to resort to malpractice during the internationally-monitored voting.

"We will have strikes and work stoppages as this country has never seen before," JVP spokesman Wimal Weerawansa warned.

The government, however, has said it was supporting a free and fair election and expressed confidence of victory.

"We are getting nearly a two-thirds majority," President Chandrika Kumaratunga told reporters here on Friday.

The main opposition UNP Sunday claimed that they were forming the next government after Tuesday's vote and said they would emerge as the single largest party despite private forecasts

that Sri Lanka was headed for a hung parliament.

Former Prime Minister and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said his party was confident of winning a majority, but warned that people would take to the streets and oust Kumaratunga if she tried to change the constitution.

"We will emerge the largest single party with over 113 seats (in the 225-member assembly)," Wickremesinghe said.

"If she tries to block us, we will take strong measures against her."

He said the president had vowed to resort to unconstitutional means to adopt a new statute after Tuesday's elections, but his UNP would resist.

"Like the Yugoslav President Milosevic, Chandrika Kumaratunga will have to go," Wickremesinghe said. "She is already running scared when I call her for a television debate."

Whatever the outcome of Tuesday's election, Kumaratunga will remain executive head of state until 2005. If Wickremesinghe's UNP is returned to power, Sri Lanka will have president and parliament from opposing parties.

President Kumaratunga is not a candidate at the polls, but her estranged brother Anura Bandaranaike is in the fray representing the opposition UNP in their home constituency of Gampaha district.

The election is monitored by several foreign observers, including a group of European Union representatives who have expressed concern over the mounting violence.

Terrorist camps in Pakistan, Afghanistan

US to share intelligence reports with India

NEW DELHI, Oct 8: The US will share satellite photographs and intelligence reports on Muslim fundamentalist terrorist camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan with India, the Hindustan Times reported today, says AFP.

"The step would be a tangible manifestation of the mutual concern between the US and India about the situation in Afghanistan, and India's concerns about the Taliban and its links with international organisations," said the report.

It added that the "highly classified information that Washington would normally keep to itself" would enable India to deal with pro-Pakistan foreign militant groups operating in the restive Indian state of Kashmir.

The newspaper quoted a US official as saying that Washington would help Indian forces "get a sense of the type of weaponry and the modus operandi that they would be up against" in dealing with terrorists trained in Afghanistan and the camps bordering Pakistan.

The report added that US intelligence agencies had obtained copies on compact discs of a six-volume manual used by Saudi renegade Osama Bin-Laden to train recruits to launch anti-American terrorist operations, as well as forays into Kashmir.

"This information will be passed onto India for whatever preventive action it may want to take," a US official told the Hindustan Times.

Last week, Michael Sheehan, chief of the US taskforce on counter-terrorism and who visited New Delhi, said the US would provide India with anti-terrorism programmes and "increased levels" of counter-narcotics training.

The anti-terrorism assistance would also include intensive training in dealing with situations such as a hostage crisis or plane hijacking.

Washington has expressed concern in recent years that the source of anti-US terrorism is shifting from the Middle East to

Afghanistan.

Washington's concerns about the region measure up against those expressed in India, which accuses Pakistan of sponsoring a Muslim insurgency against New Delhi's rule in the disputed territory of Kashmir.

Pakistan says it provides only moral and diplomatic support to what it says is the Kashmiri people's struggle for self-determination.

India suspects that some cross-border Muslim guerrilla fighters in disputed Kashmir are linked to fugitive billionaire Osama Bin Laden, who heads Washington's official list for most wanted terrorists.

The United States believes an extremist group supported by Pakistan's military regime was behind the December hijacking of an Indian Airlines jet from Nepal, which ended after seven days in Afghanistan.

Washington has pledged to help New Delhi bring the hijackers to justice.

Pakistanis want Musharraf to gear up anti-corruption drive

ISLAMABAD, Oct 8: Pakistanis appear dismayed at the slow pace of General Pervez Musharraf's drive to end rampant corruption, despite the conviction of dozens of former officials during the first year of his military rule, reports AFP.

Commentators say the euphoria created by the initial crackdown when dozens of politicians, former officials and business leaders were arrested after last year's October 12 coup has tapered off.

According to the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), 25 billion rupees (about 415 million dollars) worth of looted funds have been recovered, mainly from bank loan defaulters.

About a dozen special accountability courts across the country have sentenced to jail some 35 people, including politicians who have also been barred from politics for long periods.

Deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif is among the convicts along with a former federal minister and four former provincial chief ministers.

Sharif got 14 years in jail for tax evasion and concealing assets, charges relating to his private purchase of a Russian helicopter. He has also been given a life term by an anti-terrorist court in a hijacking and terrorism case.

In April of last year while Sharif was still in power, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto was sentenced to five years in jail for receiving kickbacks on contracts.

Her government was dismissed by the president in November 1996 over corruption.

The military government is now investigating further corruption allegations against Benazir, who is living in self-imposed exile in London.

Human rights activists have branded the Musharraf regime's accountability ordinance "draconian," while mainstream political parties have challenged it at the Supreme Court.

Under the decree, the NAB can detain an accused for three months for investigations without filing charges, and no court can grant bail.

Almost all political parties have bitterly criticised the exemption of serving military officers and superior court judges from the purview of the accountability law.

"How can they do accountability when their own generals have been accused of corruption," said a leader of the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami, Ghafoor Ahmad, referring to alleged kickbacks in major defence deals under successive governments.

Sharif's allies and Benazir's Pakistan People's Party allege the regime is using accountability to sideline political leadership and pave the way for the continuation of dictatorial rule.

Amin Lakhani, president of the Karachi Bar Association, said "the process is not only slow but has been selective."

Haleem Siddiqui, a former federal minister under Sharif, said the anti-corruption drive was targeting mainly Sharif's family and his party leaders.

Authorities admit the accountability process has not proceeded at the desired pace, but attribute it to difficulties in detecting white collar crimes and collecting evidence.

The government is seeking the extradition of several politicians and former officials accused of corruption from the United States.

Roth, Naipaul hot favourite for Nobel Literature Prize

STOCKHOLM, Oct 8: With just days to go before this year's Nobel Literature Prize is announced, two English-language writers, Philip Roth of the United States and Trinidad's VS Naipaul, are rumoured to be the hottest contenders, reports AFP.

But as always, the Swedish Academy is tight-lipped over who it is considering for the prestigious prize, leaving literary circles guessing.

The exact date of the Literature Prize announcement is not even known yet, but it will likely be on Thursday. The Academy only announces the date 45 hours in advance, and the prize is traditionally awarded on a Thursday.

Swedish literary critic Maria Schottenius, who writes for the tabloid daily Expressen, said she believed Roth, who was awarded the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for his novel "American Pastoral", was a likely frontrunner.

"The Swedish Academy could choose Philip Roth, a well-rounded writer who has produced quality books," she told AFP. "But personally, I would choose JM Coetzee from South Africa."

"Roth is a very legitimate candidate," agreed Carl-Otto Bonnier of the Bonnier publishing house.

While Svante Weiler, of rival Norstedts, also concurred on Roth, he was less convinced about Coetzee's chances.

Coetzee "is not a candidate for the Nobel 2000 because the

Academy would not choose a second white South African author in one decade, after honouring Nadine Gordimer in 1991," he said.

He predicted instead that VS Naipaul, born in India and now living in Trinidad, stood a good chance.

"Naipaul could finally receive the prize, his name has been mentioned for more than a decade," he said.

Observers have noted however that both Roth, 67, and Naipaul, 68, are already well-known authors, which could work against them -- the Academy has shown a tendency in the past to shine the spotlight on lesser-known names.

In addition, Roth recently took home the Pulitzer Prize, one of the top literary awards in the world.

Other contenders believed to be candidates for this year's Nobel include Cees Nooteboom of the Netherlands, Hugo Klaus of Belgium and Indian-born Salman Rushdie of Britain, all of whom have been rumoured to be on the Nobel short list for the past decade.

French novelist and essayist Maurice Blanchot, Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare, Turkish Kurd Yasar Kemal, French-language writer Tahar Ben Jelloun of Morocco and Bei Dao of China are also said to be potential laureates.

Last year, the Academy honoured Guenter Grass of Germany.



Indian opposition leader and Congress president Sonia Gandhi applies a ritual dot on the temple of actors dressed as India's warrior King Rama and Laxman during the Dussehra festival in New Delhi on Saturday. India celebrates Rama's mythological battle victory every year. --AFP photo

Myanmar military to crush all opponents

YANGON, Oct 8: Anyone confronting the military government in Myanmar commits what amounts to high treason, an official newspaper warned today, reports AP.

A commentary in the Myanmar Alin newspaper said the ruling military, unconcerned about internal or foreign threats, will annihilate any danger to national independence and sovereignty.

The present Taimadaw (military) government is a military government that has taken power temporarily but will do what is necessary when the appropriate time comes. Anyone engaged in confrontational activities amounts to committing high treason and defying authority," the article said.

No group or person was mentioned, but the opposition National League for Democracy and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi has often been accused of being confrontational and relying on Western nations, particularly the United States and Britain.

Suu Kyi, a 1991 Nobel peace

laureate, and other leaders of her party have been under virtual house arrest since Sept 22 when her second attempt in a month to travel outside Yangon was blocked by authorities.

The regime's actions have drawn international criticism and the imposition of sanctions by many countries.

Myanmar's military junta has refused to hand over power to Suu Kyi's party, which swept the 1990 general elections. It kept Suu Kyi under formal house arrest from 1989 to 1995. Even after being freed, her movements have remained heavily restricted. Hundreds of her followers have been jailed.

"Neo-colonialists, foreign broadcasting stations, and internal power-crazy people are attacking the ruling military government from all sides with allegations of violating human rights, workers' rights, women's rights and failure to hold dialogue with Daw Suu Kyi and failure to combat narcotic drugs," the article said.

BRIEFLY

Voting begins in Poland: Polling stations opened across Poland early Sunday for a presidential election in which incumbent Aleksander Kwasniewski looks set to win a second term in office, AFP reports from Warsaw.

The 46-year-old ex-communist has 57 per cent popular support according to the latest public opinion poll published Friday, comfortably above the 50 per cent needed to win the election outright and avoid a run-off vote on October 22. Of the eleven contenders seeking to unseat Kwasniewski, former foreign minister Andrzej Olechowski appeared to have the best chance to force a run-off, with the polls putting him in second place with around 17 per cent support.

DPRK envoy leaves for US: Jo Myong-Rok, the number two in the North Korean regime, left Pyongyang on Sunday for a key visit to the United States to meet President Bill Clinton and other top US officials, the North's state media said, AFP reports from Seoul.

Jo, a 68-year-old vice marshal, will be the most senior North Korean official to visit the United States. The two countries are technically at war because the 1950-53 Korean War has never been ended with a peace treaty. The North's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said Jo left on a special plane for the United States. He was due to arrive in San Francisco later Sunday to start the visit.

42 feared dead in bus plunge: A passenger bus has plunged into a torrential river in Nepal and swept away along with 42 of its passengers, police said today, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

The bus, heading from Sanfegabar to Dhangadhi in eastern Nepal, crashed through a safety rail on a bridge at Pipal Bazar and fell 45 metres into the flooded Seti River at midnight Saturday. The passengers included 50 men, women and children, police said. The local police and the army men rescued eight of the passengers with minor injuries while other 42 passengers are reported missing along with the bus," the police said.

Prince Charles won't sue former housekeeper

LONDON, Oct 8: Britain's heir to the throne Prince Charles has decided not to sue a former housekeeper who betrayed secrets about the breakdown of his marriage to the late Princess Diana, the Sunday Telegraph newspaper said, reports Reuters.

Charles told his lawyers not to take action to have Wendy Berry, 68, jailed for contempt of court for breaking a High Court injunction obtained five years ago to prevent her divulging secrets.

"The Prince of Wales does not condone Wendy Berry's book but, in the light of her present personal circumstances, they are not proposing to take any further action and have told her by letter," St James' Palace said in the Sunday Telegraph.

Charles decided to show mercy due to Berry's age and due to the fact that her youngest son is in remission from leukaemia, the paper added.

A British High Court judge issued a worldwide ban in 1995 on books and articles written by Berry, the prince's former housekeeper, and ordered all profits to be paid to Charles.

Vietnam flood death toll tops 300

MEKONG DELTA, Vietnam, Oct 8: Meteorologists warned on Sunday that rains and winds lashing the coast of central Vietnam could strengthen to storm force as deaths in catastrophic floods in the southern Mekong Delta topped 300, reports Reuters.

Officials of the southern region anti-flood committee told Reuters the floods, which have swamped vast areas of the Delta for the past month, had killed 308 people as of Sunday morning, 232 of them children.

They said that despite the rising toll, waters levels in the worst-hit upstream provinces bordering Cambodia had continued to decline slowly.

But the national weather centre said a tropical low pressure area affecting a 400 km stretch of coast from the central province of Quang Ngai south to Binh Thuan could worsen.

A meteorological official said the system had already brought torrential rains and strong winds to parts of the coast.

"It's possible it could become a storm later in the day," the official said.

Tropical storms and floods wreak havoc in Vietnam every year, but the Delta inundations from the swollen Mekong River have been the worst in four decades.

The International Red Cross

said on Friday it was rushing to get further emergency rice supplies to the Delta and would start a big rice hand out for 38,000, or 190,000 people, next week.

An official of the southern anti-flood committee said on Saturday that more than 50,000 people were going hungry the Delta and another hundred thousand may run short of food.

While the Delta is one of the world's premier rice growing areas, the floods, which have spread to eight provinces, have made transportation and movement of supplies very difficult.

In all, the homes of about four million people have been flooded. The official Vietnam News Agency said on Friday 200,000 people had been evacuated and 500,000 were in need of emergency relief.

Most evacuees have lived for weeks in cramped, dirty conditions atop crumbling earth dykes or raised roadways. It is likely to be late-November before the waters subside fully and evacuees can return home.

The floods have now killed nearly 500 people across Southeast Asia. International organisations have blamed deforestation for the disaster.

Last week, Vietnam's state media quoted provincial health officials as saying there had been cholera outbreaks in Laos and Cambodia, and the disease was spreading towards Vietnam.