

International

Singapore Airlines jet took off from wrong runway

TAIPEI, Nov 3: A Singapore Airlines jumbo jet which crashed on Tuesday, killing 81 people, slammed into construction equipment while taking off in a typhoon from a runway that was closed for repairs, Taiwanese authorities said today, reports AFP.

"We are sure that the aircraft took off from the wrong runway from the very beginning. It bumped into some steel items and two heavy mechanical excavators and then exploded," Song Kuo-yeh, a prosecutor from Taoyuan county who is leading the investigation into the causes of the crash, told AFP.

The airline, which had previously dismissed reports the pilot had taxied on to the closed runway, accepted that this was what had happened.

"The aircraft was on the wrong runway, and we want to understand now how could this have happened," airline public affairs vice president Rick Clements said in Singapore.

The Los Angeles-bound Boeing 747 was carrying 159 passengers and 20 crew when it crashed.

The plane's Malaysian pilot, Captain Foong Chee Kong, and co-pilots Latiff Cyrano and Ng Kheng Leng have been barred from leaving Taiwan pending further investigation.

The prosecutors' conclusion that the plane had taken off from the wrong runway followed detailed crash site surveys, a study of the contents of the two "black box" flight recorders and interviews with the plane's pilots, witnesses and air traffic controllers.

Song said investigators would now focus on whether the

runways were correctly lit.

Ill-fated flight SQ006 took off as Typhoon Xangsane lashed the island. Survivors who were seated behind the cockpit have reported being alarmed by the low level of visibility from the front of the plane.

The closed runway, number 05R, runs parallel to the one from which the plane should have taken off, 05L.

Runways which are closed are normally not lit up to make it clear they are not in use. But this is not the case at Chiang Kai-shek airport, where a single switch controls green lights on the common taxiway to both runways and down the middle of 05R.

Civil Aeronautics Administration Deputy Director Chang Kuo-cheng said the 05L runway was fully lit on Tuesday night by white/yellow lights and only the central green lights were on on the parallel runway.

On the taxiway to the runways, four large signs point the way to 05L, he added. But he refused to state explicitly that pilot error was the primary cause of the mix-up.

Runway 05R was not blocked off by barriers because part of the strip was used by landing planes to taxi back to the terminal.

The pilot confirmed twice to the control tower that he was on the correct runway. But officials there did not know the plane had actually gone on to the wrong runway because the airport does not have ground radar and the plane was out of sight at the time of its takeoff.

Pilots on two China Airlines flights waiting for takeoff behind the doomed SIA plane saw it turn on to the closed

runway but apparently did not alert anyone.

SIA airline had strongly defended the 48-year-old pilot as an experienced man with more than 11,000 hours flying time and knew the airport well.

But Clements acknowledged: "The families of those who passed away on that flight, all those who were on board SQ006 and the public at large will want some answers."

"They will want reassurances that such a horrifying mistake could never happen again."

SIA's statement prompted a crisis of confidence in the company's shares, which plunged four percent on the local bourse.

Tuesday's catastrophe has led to calls for a tightening of restrictions on planes taking off in storm conditions.

A number of planes took off and landed safely from the airport in the hour before the crash.

But Cathay Pacific has revealed that two of its Taipei-bound planes turned back to Hong Kong around the same time because of concern about strong winds and rain. At least four flights out of Taipei - a Cathay cargo carrier and three operated by Taiwan's Eva Air - were cancelled.

Planes ability to resist storm conditions however vary with their size and the 747 is considered one of the best-equipped to fly in adverse weather.

Of the 79 people who died instantly - two others succumbed to their injuries in hospital - only 30 had been positively identified by DNA tests. When it crashed, the plane broke into three pieces and exploded in a fireball. Many of the dead were burnt beyond recognition.



Relatives pray for the victims beside the crashed plane at Taipei Chiang Kai-shek international airport yesterday. Singapore Airlines admitted that the jumbo jet took off from a runway closed for repair, causing the death of 81 people. --AFP photo

Mir appointed Pak air force chief

ISLAMABAD, Nov 3: Pakistan's military regime yesterday named Air Marshal Mushaf Ali Mir, who was among top officials taking part in 1971 Indo-Pak War, as the new chief of the Air Staff, an official statement here said, reports PTI.

Mir will take over command of Pakistan air force from Air Chief Marshal Farvaiz Medhi Qureshi on November 20.

In his illustrious career, Mir, 53, had been honoured with Hilal-e-Imtiaz and Sitara-e-Bassalat awards in recognition of his services.

His assignments abroad included a position to the United States as representative of the Pakistan air force with the US air force, the state-run AFP News Agency said.

Israel rejects Palestinian demand for UN protection force

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 3: Israel's Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami has rejected Palestinian demands for a 2,000-strong UN protection force and said the United States has promised to veto any Security Council resolution to create a force, reports AP.

The council, under pressure from Palestinian supporters to get quickly, has delayed a discussion of the situation in the Middle East until next Wednesday the day after the US elections.

The delay was widely seen as a victory for US President Bill Clinton's administration, which came under fire from Israeli supporters for abstaining on a resolution last month that implicitly accused the Jewish state of using "excessive force" against the Palestinians in clashes that began Sept 28. More than 160 people have been killed in five weeks of violence, the vast majority of them Palestinians.

With a very close presidential race between Democratic Vice President Al Gore and Republican Gov George W Bush, diplomats

said the Clinton administration wanted to avoid putting the issue in the spotlight again before voters go to the polls on Tuesday.

Last week, the Palestinians asked the council to send troops urgently to ensure the safety and security of its civilians. This week, the Palestinians circulated proposals for a force of 2,000 UN military observers who would deploy throughout the territory occupied by Israel in 1967.

Ben-Ami said he made it clear to Secretary-General Kofi Annan during an hour-long meeting Thursday that there is no need at all for any international force.

The Palestinians, who accuse Israel of continuing a "campaign of terror against the Palestinian people," want greater UN and international involvement. Israel wants the Palestinians to stop the violence, adhere to the agreement reached last month at a US-mediated summit in Egypt, and get back to the business of peace-making, Ben-Ami said.

The key to what the Security Council does or doesn't do is likely to rest with Annan, who is working for implementation of the agreement reached by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

At Thursday's meeting, Annan and Ben-Ami agreed on the need to fully implement the summit agreement, to restore calm and to create "the right atmosphere for the resumption of peace negotiations," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said.

The Netherlands' UN Ambassador Peter van Walsum, who just took over the rotating Security Council presidency, said Thursday the council had agreed that next Wednesday's discussion would cover not just the Palestinian proposal or a possible draft resolution on a UN force "but the situation in the Middle East."

If the Security Council doesn't take any action, the Palestinian UN Observer Nasser al-Kidwa has left open the possibility of taking the request for a UN force to the General Assembly, where they are no vetoes.

Philippine Congress leaders with 45 legislators quit ruling party

MANILA, Nov 3: The influential heads of both houses of the Philippine Congress and at least 45 legislators quit the ruling party today, dealing a humiliating blow to President Joseph Estrada and piling on the pressure for him to resign for alleged corruption, reports AFP.

Senate President Franklin Drilon and House of Representatives Speaker Manuel Villar separately announced their resignations from Estrada's ruling coalition LAMP party with two other senators and the 45 legislators.

The defection of Estrada's partymen comes a day after Trade Secretary Manuel Roxas quit the cabinet and five business leaders serving as presidential advisers also said they were resigning.

Angelito Banayo, a political adviser of Estrada, also resigned on Friday, radio reports said.

The defection of so many legislators paves the way for the House to approve impeachment

proceedings to be held in the Senate over allegations that Estrada took eight million dollars in bribes from illegal gambling bosses.

"This assures the required number of signatures for the articles of impeachment to be submitted for trial at the Senate," Villar said, adding "we are doing this to speed up the process of investigation against our president."

Drilon said aside from leaving the ruling coalition he had "joined the call for the resignation of the president" referring to the growing clamor from various groups for Estrada to resign.

However, Drilon said he and the other senators would be "impartial in the impeachment trial."

The lower house, which had been dominated by Estrada's party, is scheduled to begin studying the impeachment motion on Monday.

If at least one third of the House, or about 73 members, sign the motion, it may automatically bypass the lower chamber for a trial in the Senate.

Sixteen votes in the 24-member Senate are needed to convict Estrada and remove him from office. Estrada used to have 18 partymates and allies in the Senate, but four have since left his coalition.

Estrada, the 63-year-old former movie star, had no immediate reaction to the resignations, choosing instead to survey by air the trail of damage left by a typhoon.

"I think for all intent and purpose, he (Estrada) is finished," Jose de Venecia, a former speaker and national chairman of the opposition Lakas party told AFP.

Vice President Gloria Arroyo, the constitutional successor if Estrada resigns, now heads up a coalition of opposition groups after quitting from the cabinet when the gambling scandal surfaced last month.

The president, now in the third year of his six-year presidential term, has flatly rejected the claims and said he would defend himself in any impeachment hearing.

Arroyo said that even before the 45 congressmen bolted the ruling coalition, they were confident of getting 65 signatures in favour of impeachment proceedings.

There is tremendous political and psychological pressure on the Senate to do their duty and it cannot ignore this pressure of massive, powerful public opinion, de Venecia added.

Arroyo said the resignations showed that the former Estrada allies "realize that the president has really lost his mandate."

Estrada's chief aide, executive secretary Ronaldo Zamora said the president got wind of the impending resignation of Villar and the others late Thursday.

Eight killed in Kashmir gunbattles

SRINAGAR, India, Nov 3: Four Indian troops and four suspected foreign militants died today in two separate gunbattles in the restive Himalayan territory of Kashmir, a police spokesman said, reports AFP.

Three Indian army soldiers and two foreign militants died early Friday in a gunbattle near the central town of Wathura in Budgam District.

Two AK-47 rifles and grenades were recovered from the dead rebels, whose nationality was not specified.

Witnesses said that since late Thursday the Indian army had cordoned off a residential area to search for militants, triggering the firefight.

In a separate incident, two alleged foreign militants and a border guard were killed in another gunbattle in the neighbouring village of Kothipora, Border Security Force (BSF) spokesman R.P. Singh said.

The BSF, meanwhile, recovered a major cache of arms and ammunition from Sundigal, in the frontier district of Kupwara.

The haul included seven AK-47 rifles, 26 grenades, two pistols, 26 kilogrammes of plastic RDX explosive and three anti-tank mines.

Nearly a dozen militant groups are fighting New Delhi's rule in Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state. The separatist Muslim insurgency has claimed more than 34,000 lives since it was launched in 1989.

The Himalayan state of Kashmir is divided between Pakistan and India and is claimed by both neighbours.



Soldiers loyal to Fijian strongman Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama watch from a bunker at a military roadblock on the approach to the troubled capital Suva yesterday. The search continued for mutineers loyal to coup leader George Speight, who escaped after a gun battle at the Queen Victoria Barracks on Thursday, which left at least eight dead. --AFP photo

8 dead in Fiji army mutiny

SUVA, Nov 3: Eight soldiers have died after a military mutiny by soldiers linked to a coup earlier this year, army spokesman Major Howard Politini said today, reports AFP.

Suva is now at a standstill, under a strict curfew until Saturday as the army hunts for 20 armed rebels who escaped after a siege of the army barracks Thursday.

The eight died in a fierce gun battle between rebel soldiers who took over the army barracks at midday on Thursday and seized five officers and troops loyal to Fiji Military Forces commander Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama.

Three of the dead are soldiers from the loyalist camp and five are rebel soldiers, Politini said.

Radio Fiji was earlier reporting nine dead and the death toll is expected to rise.

Bush arrested in 1976 for drunken driving

CHICAGO, Nov 3: Republican presidential nominee George W Bush was arrested for drunken driving and had his driving license suspended in 1976 after drinking several beers in a bar, the Bush campaign acknowledged on Thursday, reports Reuters.

The disclosure was made five days before the election as polls show Bush running neck-and-neck with Democrat rival Al Gore.

Spokeswoman Karen Hughes said Bush, who was 30 at the time, pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of driving while under the influence, paid a \$150 fine, and had his license suspended in the state of Maine for "a period of time."

Hughes disclosed the September 1976 incident to reporters at the foot for Bush's campaign plane as the prepared to fly to Milwaukee for a campaign rally.

"It was a mistake and he is very sorry that it happened," Hughes said.

Fox News Channel first reported the arrested and suspension of Bush's license on its evening news programme earlier on Thursday.

"I hope this mistake the governor made 24 years ago would not have an impact in the final days of



in the past years ago when he was drinking," Hughes said. "This is something he is not proud of. Drinking and driving is wrong."

The campaign of Democratic nominee Al Gore vehemently denied it had anything to do with leaking the news and refused any further comment.

"The Gore campaign had nothing to do with this and this is just something that we're not commenting on," said Gore spokesman Chris Leahane. "It would be inappropriate to comment on this."

Hughes said Bush's wife Laura was telephoning their twin 18-year-old daughters Jenna and Barbara to tell them about this previously closely guarded secret.

Bush talked about his decision to quit drinking just this week, during a visit to a drug rehabilitation centre in San Jose, California.

"I quit drinking in 1986. I have not had a drop since then," he said. "It wasn't because of a government programme in my case. I heard a higher calling."

No accident was involved in the 1976 incident, Hughes said, adding that Bush was apparently pulled over because he was apparently driving too slowly.

BRIEFLY

India test-fires Lakhya: The indigenously built unmanned air vehicle, Lakhya, was successfully test fired on Thursday from the interim test range at Chandipur-on-Sea, about 15-km from Balasore, according to official sources, PTI reports from Balasore.

Developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation of India, Lakhya is designed to perform discrete aerial reconnaissance battlefields including target acquisition. The vehicle was test fired several times earlier.

Seoul to buy German submarines: South Korea has decided to spend 1.27 trillion won (dlns 1.1 billion) to build German-designed submarines by 2009, the Defence Ministry said Friday, AP reports from Seoul.

Germany's Howaldtswerke-Deutsche Werft AG beat France's DCN International to win South Korea's contract to build 1,800-ton submarines, the ministry said in a news release. The ministry did not specify the number of submarines but said it would be less than 10. The leading Chosun Ilbo newspaper said South Korea will build three submarines with the German company.

Malaysian man runs amok, kills 6: A sword-wielding man killed his mother and five others during a bloody rampage in the east Malaysian state of Sarawak on Thursday, Reuters reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Police in the town of Miri, an oil-rich area, told Reuters the 33-year-old man killed two nephews and a niece, aged between one and three. He also slashed to death a 40-year-old neighbour and her one-year-old grandson, they added. Police arrested the man after they found him lying unconscious beside a car which he had crashed in an effort to escape.

Quake rocks Japan: A fairly strong earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 4.7 rocked southwestern Japan Friday, but there were no immediate reports of injuries or damage, AP reports from Tokyo.

The 4:41 pm (341 BST) quake hit western Tottori and eastern Shimane prefectures (state), about 500 kilometres northwest of Tokyo, Tottori borders Shimane to the east. It was generally the same region that was struck by a powerful 7.3 magnitude quake early last month, which injured more than 100 people and forced thousands to flee to shelters.

19 N Korean spies held in South: South Korea has arrested 19 spies from North Korea since the inauguration of President Kim Dae-Jung and his moves to seek rapprochement with the Stalinist state, the South's spy agency said today, AFP reports from Seoul.

"We have cracked down on 19 spies involved in 13 espionage cases since 1998" when Kim took office, Lim Dong-Won, head of the National Intelligence Service (NIS), said during its parliamentary inspection. The NIS chief said nine North Korean spies were arrested in 1998, eight in 1999 and two for the first eight months to August this year.

Taiwan parliament postpones bill to impeach president

TAIPEI, Nov 3: Taiwan's parliament today postponed until next week its review of a bill to impeach President Chen Shui-bian for scrapping a partly-built nuclear plant as slogan-chanting supporters and opponents rallied outside, reports AFP.

Parliamentarian Chen Hung-chi of the leading opposition Kuomintang (KMT) told reporters "this was not the right time to discuss the bill" when Taiwan needs concerted efforts to recover from Typhoon Xangsane.

The typhoon battered the island with its worst storm in 30 years leaving at least 54 people dead and another 32 missing.

Parliament said the review, originally scheduled for Friday, would now most likely to take place next Tuesday or Friday.

The crisis was sparked by the government's announcement on October 27 that it would scrap a partly-built 5.6 billion US dollar nuclear power plant in northern Taiwan despite opposition objections.

KMT legislator Ting Shou-chung who initiated the bill was also reluctant to push it through.

"We'll wait until the best timing and full support of the general public," Ting said.

Analysts here believe growing public objections to the draconian punitive measures against Chen may be the reason for the postponement.

Opponents of the bill feared the move lacked legitimacy and would destabilise the political environment.

Taliban envoy calls on US ambassador in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Nov 3: The Taliban ambassador to Pakistan made a "courtesy call" on his US counterpart Thursday amid mounting fears in Afghanistan of an imminent US military strike, officials said, reports AFP.

A US embassy spokesman said Taliban Ambassador Abdul Salam Zaeif called on US Ambassador William B. Milam but the details of their discussions were not revealed.

The Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) quoted Zaeif as saying the talks lasted two hours and centred on Afghanistan's concerns about the possibility of a US strike against suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden.

Fears of a US attack against bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan arose after a blast killed 17 sailors aboard a US warship in Yemen on October 12.

US investigators have not discounted the possibility that bin Laden could be responsible.

Washington launched cruise missiles at some of bin Laden's suspected terrorist camps in Afghanistan in August 1998 in retaliation for the twin bombings of US embassies in Africa which killed more than 220 people.

Bin Laden, the alleged mastermind of the embassy attacks and a well-known financier of Islamic militant groups, escaped unhurt.

The wealthy Saudi-born dissident is living in Afghanistan as a "guest" of the ruling Taliban Islamic militia, which has refused to extradite him to stand trial for the embassy attacks.

According to AIP, Milam told Zaeif that Washington had no concrete evidence linking bin Laden to the bombing of the US destroyer.

Zaeif said both sides agreed to resolve their differences through negotiations.

Typhoon Bebinca kills 17 in Manila

MANILA, Nov 3: At least 17 people were killed and seven others were missing after Typhoon Bebinca barreled through Manila and the northern Philippines at dawn today, toppling trees, cutting power, triggering landslides and flooding many areas, officials and radio reports said, reports AP.

Schools in affected areas, government offices, and many shops and banks were closed.

The typhoon, packing winds of up to 150 kilometres per hour, was about 120 kilometres west of Manila at midday Friday and was moving at 19 kph toward southern China. It was expected to gain strength as it moved across the South China Sea, the weather bureau said.

Among the fatalities were four mountain climbers who drowned while trying to cross a swollen river in



Residents wait on their rooftop for rubber boats as floodwaters submerged their houses in Manila yesterday after Typhoon Bebinca raked across the northern Philippines leaving at least 17 people dead and nine missing. --AFP photo

Vacation on the moon!

CARACAS, Nov 3: Venezuela's president hopes a new space project in the South American country will offer tourists vacations on the moon, reports Reuters.

Former paratrooper Hugo Chavez said he met a group of US businessmen last week who proposed building a space shuttle and launch pad in the huge southern plains bordering the river Orinoco.

"Within a hundred years, and maybe less, there will be people taking holidays on the moon," Chavez told reporters.

A failed military coup leader who swept to electoral victory in 1998, Chavez has set about lifting his poverty-stricken countrymen out of the ranks of the Third World with an idiosyncratic "democratic revolution."

One of his pet projects is to develop the deserted southern plains with billions of dollars of state oil earnings.

"If it is viable, this construction plan for space vehicles could coincide with plans for a city and a technology centre," Chavez said.

Little-known Texas-based Lone Star Space proposed building the shuttle and launch pad in association with the Venezuelan government, according to local media.