

Malaysia on alert against Indonesian migrants

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police were on alert to prevent the illegal entry of thousands of Indonesians fleeing their country's social unrest, a top security official said Sunday.

"We have obtained information from Indonesian authorities that thousands of Indonesians are waiting for the right time to enter Malaysia," marine police chief Senior Assistant Commissioner Muhamad Muda told AFP.

Muhamad said the migrants were waiting in Sumatra and Batam island to try to sneak into Malaysia's west coast states of Selangor, Malacca, Negri Sembilan and Johor in search of employment.

"The economic and political instability in Indonesia are the push factors," he said, adding "the police are on high alert following a sudden influx of illegals in January and February."

The Indonesians enter Malaysia in rickety boats across the Malacca Strait under cover of darkness and sometimes use the control tower lights of Kuala Lumpur international airport to guide them towards Selangor, he said.

"It may get worse, given the social unrest that has been reported in various parts of Indonesia," he said.

Powell urges Israel, PA to halt ME violence

Talks with Arafat begin

AFP, Jerusalem

Visiting US Secretary of State Colin Powell waded into the seething Middle East crisis Sunday, urging Israel and the Palestinians to halt violence and pledging that US President George W. Bush would take a "strong role" in the peace process.

"I think we all need to work hard, all sides, to bring the violence under control, get out of this terrible cycle where we have violence, counter violence," Powell told reporters after a 90-minute meeting with Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon.

Powell, on the second leg of a whirlwind three-day tour of the region, focused largely on Iraq and the moribund Middle East peace process, describing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a "very dangerous situation."

"Of course the United States cannot want peace more than the parties and cannot make the hard choices... but President Bush plans to take a strong role," he said, describing the US relationship with Israel as "unbreakable."

Powell said that when he met Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat later Sunday he would discuss steps the Palestinians can take to halt the violence that has raged through the region for five months and cost almost 420 lives, mostly Palestinian.

But Sharon, the hawkish former general who trounced outgoing prime minister Ehud Barak in an election almost three weeks ago, insisted that the negotiations cannot resume until the end of the anti-Israeli uprising.

"As prime minister, I will conduct negotiations with the PA (Palestinian Authority) following the cessation of

hostilities," Sharon said. "Israel will not be negotiating under pressure of terror or violence."

He added that before any face-to-face meeting with the Palestinian leader, "steps have to be taken by Yasser Arafat and he is fully aware of these steps" although he said there was a "channel of discussions" with the Palestinians.

If calm is restored, Sharon said, Israel would be prepared to "ease the economic conditions of the Palestinian people."

Powell had been expected to raise with Israel demands for Washington that it ease a punishing blockade on the Palestinian territories and transfer tax revenue owed to Arafat's self-rule authority amid UN warnings that the PA risked financial collapse.

"Sharon clearly understands the importance of it (transferring the funds), but the question of when Barak and Sharon actually do anything about it is still up in the air," a senior US official said.

Powell was later heading to the West Bank city of Ramallah for his meeting with Arafat, following a short meeting with Israeli President Moshe Katsav and a visit to the Yad Vashem memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Colin Powell began talks here Sunday with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat expected to focus on ways to end five months of deadly violence and an easing of the Israeli blockade on the Palestinian territories.

Powell entered talks with Arafat and other top officials, including senior peace negotiator Saeb Erakat and international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath, following a 90-minute meeting in Jerusalem with Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon.

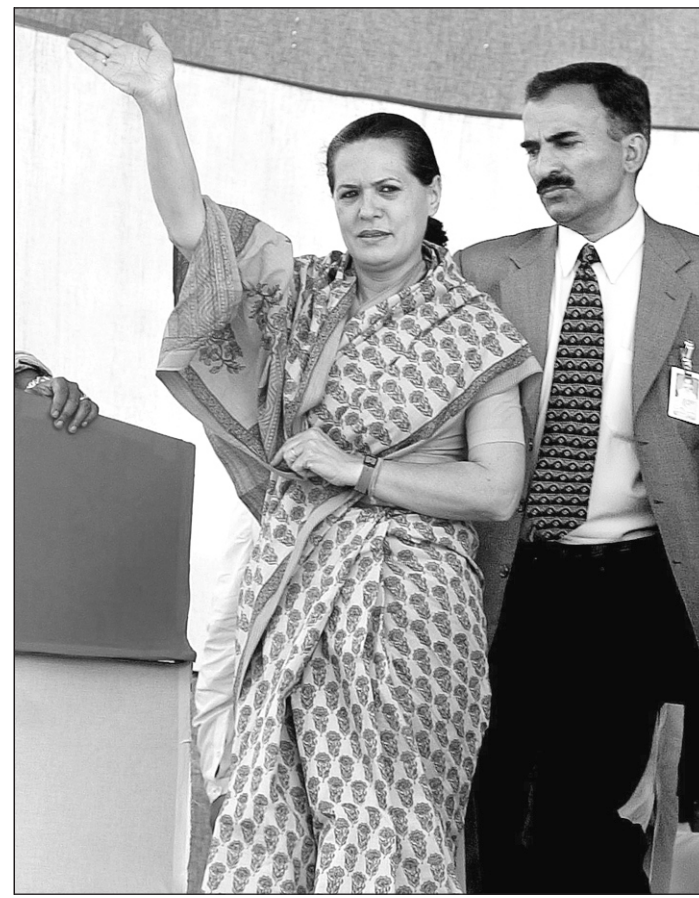


PHOTO: AFP

India's main opposition leader and Congress (I) Party president Sonia Gandhi (L) waves to people as a security personnel looks on during a farmer's rally in New Delhi on Sunday. Sonia hit out at the ruling Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) led coalition government for its anti-poor policies during the rally, attended by thousands of party supporters and farmers.

EU presses Lanka on democracy, HR

REUTERS, Colombo

The European Union (EU) said on Saturday it was pressing Sri Lanka to push through democratic reforms and improve its human rights record.

"We will maintain as much pressure as we can to ensure that democracy is fully realised," Gerard Collins, leader of a visiting European Parliamentary delegation, told a news conference in Colombo.

Collins said the five-member delegation had urged the Sri Lankan government to carry out election reforms recommended by EU polls monitors after last October's parliamentary elections.

He said the 16 recommendations, which seek to make elections fairer and more transparent, would ensure that "nobody muscled their way through the electoral process."

The October polls were marred by violence and allegations of widespread ballot stuffing by President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA), which prompted the EU monitors to say voters in some areas had been "disenfranchised" by candidates.

The PA lost its parliamentary majority and now depends on two minority allies for control of the legislature.

Collins said the delegation had also raised concerns over human rights in its talks with Sri Lankan political and religious leaders during

the five-day visit that ended on Saturday.

"There are people being detained on suspicion without trial or even charges preferred against them for years," said Collins.

Sri Lanka's tough emergency laws, mostly used to combat a Tamil separatist rebellion in the country's north and east, allow detention of suspects for long periods without trial.

Collins called for a beefing up of Sri Lanka's independent human rights commission and voiced concern over the slow progress of investigations into a massacre of Tamil detainees last year.

"It's been a long time since the massacre and very little has been done about it..." said Collins, adding the government had promised to address the EU's concerns.

A machete-wielding mob of majority Sinhales rampaged through a rehabilitation camp for surrendered Tamil rebels and child soldiers last October, killing 27 inmates and seriously wounding several others.

Both the massacre and electoral reforms were raised by the EU presidency during Sri Lanka's World Bank development forum in Paris last year.

Philippines gets special peace award from Nobel laureates

AFP, Manila

An organisation of Nobel laureates on Sunday gave the Philippines a special award for concluding a peaceful revolution that ousted the graft-tainted government of Joseph Estrada last month.

The award, given by the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate's Foundation, was presented to President Gloria Arroyo, who was installed as the country's 14th president in place of the disgraced Estrada.

Foundation chairman Pierre Marchand said the Philippines was the first country to have received such a citation for demonstrating that a peaceful revolt could lead a smooth transition of power.

The January uprising that toppled Estrada came 15 years after a similar revolt toppled the 20-year regime of dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.

Marchand in a brief message during ceremonies marking the anniversary of the first "people power" revolution said Filipinos had once more inspired the world.

He said the foundation was "in love" with the Philippines, as he bowed before Arroyo and handed over the plaque.



PHOTO: AFP

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo (R) shares a light moment with former president Corazon Aquino (L) in Manila on Sunday during ceremonies marking the 15th anniversary of a popular uprising that brought down the 20-year brutal regime of dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Arroyo became the country's 2nd woman president last month on the back of a similar uprising that ousted the corruption-tainted government of Joseph Estrada.

Milosevic's secret police chief arrested for murder

Another ally replaced as head of Montenegro's opposition

AFP, Belgrade

Serbia's new reformist government has launched its strongest attack yet on former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic's regime, arresting former Serbian secret police chief and Milosevic ally Rade Markovic.

Markovic, the highest-ranking official from the former regime to be arrested since Milosevic was overthrown in a popular revolt in October, is under investigation for "premeditated murder", Serbian Justice Minister Vladan Batic said late Saturday.

A leading parliamentarian suggested the arrest was just the beginning of a process which would culminate in Milosevic himself being brought to justice.

"I guarantee that no longer will anyone in the country be able to break the law and live an untroubled life supported by the political authorities," said Cedomir Jovanovic of the ruling reformist Serb Democratic

Opposition (DOS).

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague has indicted the former president and four of his top allies for war crimes allegedly committed in the Kosovo conflict in 1998-99.

So far, Yugoslav officials, especially Milosevic's reformist successor Vojislav Kostunica, have been extremely reluctant to hand over the wanted men, arguing that the constitution forbids extradition of Yugoslav citizens.

But following increased international pressure, Belgrade has said it would change the law to allow for a transfer.

Batic refused to comment on the Milosevic situation but told reporters that Belgrade prosecutors had launched an inquiry into Markovic's potential connection with an October 1999 car crash which claimed the lives of four members of Vuk Draskovic's Serbian Renewal Movement.

The minister said that two other Serbian interior ministry employees were also the subject of the probe into the crash, which left Draskovic injured.

Batic said the investigation would look into whether the two "caused, with the aid of a truck, an accident killing four people and injuring Draskovic."

The minister told journalists that the inquiry could be finished "within one or two days" and that when completed, he and Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic "will make all of the details public."

Meanwhile, the main opposition party in Montenegro has voted to replace its leader Momir Bulatovic, a former prime minister of Yugoslavia and a close ally of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic.

The Popular Socialist Party (SNP) chose Predrag Bulatovic, until now its vice-president, to succeed Momir Bulatovic, now considered too close to the out-of-favour Milosevic.

30 killed in Algeria in two days

AFP, Algiers

Twenty seven armed Islamic extremists have been killed in the past two days in two operations by security forces west of the Algerian capital, the local press reported Sunday.

Another three people were killed and 27 injured on late Saturday in a bomb blast at Laghouat, 400 km south of Algiers, several newspapers reported. Most of the injured were soldiers.

The two operations against Islamic fighters were near Ain Defla and Mascara, respectively 160 kilometres (100 miles) and 360 kilometres (225 miles) west of Algiers.

Neither operation was officially confirmed or denied by the Algerian authorities.

Indian military calls for more allocation

AFP, New Delhi

India's military has called for more funds in the annual defence budget, but an economic slowdown and costlier imports are likely to overshadow its ambitions of acquiring modern hardware from the West.

But defence experts argue Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government has no option but to accord the highest priority to defence spending to match the growing firepower of its immediate neighbours Pakistan and China.

The government last weekend said India's fiscal health in 2001-02 was injured by a soaring fiscal deficit and disappointing economic growth of six per cent in the current fiscal year ending March 31.

Last year, India boosted its defence spending by 130 billion rupees (three billion dollars) to 13.5 billion dollars, but the military said the historic 28 per cent jump had

been swallowed by spiralling tensions in Kashmir.

India has steadfastly held its military expenses below 2.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) to avoid international criticism, despite the fact nearly 60 per cent of the funds are used for wages and pensions.

"We must get real about it and if the military needs more than 3.5 per cent of the GDP then we must go for it as defence has assumed greater importance than other sectors today," former air force chief N.C. Suri told AFP.

"The increase in the defence budget last year did not show much potential in real terms, what with exchange rate variations, increases in fuel and material costs and rising inflation."

"By pragmatic budget what we mean is that India must address itself in real terms to procure what the defence sector today needs,

and is committed to pay for," Suri said.

India earlier this month decided to buy 310 Russian tanks worth 800 million dollars and said it would also acquire a Russian aircraft carrier and 50 MIG-29 fighter jets for two billion dollars.

New Delhi is also negotiating with French firms for the supply of up to eight submarines worth hundreds of millions of dollars and is in talks with British Aerospace for 66 advanced jet trainers worth 1.6 billion dollars.

India has also speeded up efforts to mass produce a longer-range ballistic missile and is believed to be engaged in a secret project costing millions of dollars for a nuclear-capable maritime cruise missile.

Kapil Kak, a military expert affiliated with India's National Security Council, described as "gloomy" the widespread projections the 2001-02 defence budget would not exceed 2.6 per cent of GDP.

VHP urges Indian PM to hand over Babri Mosque site

AFP, New Delhi

Leaders of a hardline Hindu party on Saturday urged Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to hand over a site where an ancient mosque was demolished by Hindu zealots in 1992.

Leaders from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Forum) met Vajpayee at his home and said the site in northern Ayodhya town should be handed over "immediately" for the construction of a Hindu temple on the mosque ruins.

"We demanded the immediate return of the land acquired by the government," said Paramahans Ramchandra Das, president of a forum set up to build the temple to Hindu warrior lord Rama on the rubble of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.

The VHP is one of the rightwing Hindu allies of prime minister Vajpayee's BJP party.

Hindu fanatics on December 6, 1992 razed the 16th-century Islamic shrine in the belief it was built by invading Moghul emperor Babar on the site of a Rama temple in the northern Indian pilgrimage town.

The sacrilege triggered nationwide Hindu-Muslim rioting that left more than 2,000 people dead, mostly Muslims.

Groups such as the VHP have given Vajpayee's government until March 12 next year to remove all obstacles for the construction of the Rama temple.

The dispute over the site, which is currently barricaded and guarded by paramilitary forces, is still mired in India's legal system.

Das said: "We asked Vajpayee that if the Rama temple is not built during his tenure as prime minister, when will it be built."

Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party-led government came under fire from its coalition allies and the opposition last December when he said the temple campaign was an "unfinished task" and a product of national sentiment.

The building of the Ram temple was the BJP's official policy, but the explosive clause was dropped from the coalition manifesto in deference to the Hindu nationalist party's allies.

Another quake causes panic in El Salvador

AFP, San Salvador

Another earthquake, measuring between 4.2 and 5.0 on the Richter scale, shook central El Salvador Saturday, sending thousands of residents of the capital and other towns running from office blocks and shopping centers in panic.

There were no immediate reports of injuries or casualties in this latest quake, felt across the central region of the country.

It measured 4.2 on the Richter scale and had its epicenter near the capital, according to the country's National Emergency Committee. Nicaragua's Territorial Studies Institute said it had recorded the quake as magnitude 5.0.

It struck at around 10:40 am (22:40 BST) Saturday just 24 hours after another tremor, measuring 4.2 on the open-ended Richter scale, had been felt across the same area.

The psychological impact of this week's tremors has been strong, coming on the heels of two major earthquakes this year, and innumerable aftershocks felt by a now highly-sensitized populations.



PHOTO: AFP

Vivan Bhatena holds the winners trophy of the "Mr. India 2001" after the announcement of the result in Calcutta on Saturday. The seventh year of "Mr. India" competition organised by Grasim, a dress material company is one of the most sought after male pageants in India

US sub's commanding officer regrets for crash

AFP, Tokyo

Commander Scott Waddle, the commanding officer of the USS Greeneville, has expressed regret for the first time since the submarine struck a Japanese trawler off Hawaii, a national television network said Sunday.

The commander stated his regret in a letter sent to Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK) through his lawyers in Washington, NHK said.

"It is with a heavy heart that I express my most sincere regret" to the Japanese people and families of victims of the accident, the commander said in the letter.

It was the first time he has expressed his regret in public since February 9 when the Greeneville slammed into the Ehime Maru while demonstrating an emergency ascent maneuver to a group of civilian VIPs, NHK said.

Waddle is scheduled to appear at a special navy panel on March 5 to mark the start of the formal inquiry into the accident, which left nine Japanese feared dead, and sank their vessel.

Anger intensified in Japan following Washington's admission that civilian guests were at the helm of the nuclear-powered submarine before the accident.

Earlier, the United States is sending an admiral to Japan on a damage control mission amid mounting evidence that civilians aboard the USS Greeneville, as well as careless seamanship, contributed to the nuclear-powered submarine's collision with a Japanese trawler.

Navy spokesmen refused to comment on reports that a preliminary inquiry has found that a distracted sonar man plotted the Ehime Maru at 2,000 meters (yards) from the submarine but failed to alert the commander of the Greeneville.

Borneo violence spreads to provincial capital

AFP, Sampit

Thousands of desperate refugees fought for space on evacuation ships from this Borneo town Sunday as the official death toll from a week of ethnic bloodshed rose to 270, and the violence spread to the provincial capital and other townships.

"I can see smoke rising here," a policeman in Palangkaraya, the Central Kalimantan provincial capital of Palangkaraya, 220 km northeast of the devastated river town of Sampit told AFP.

He said at least 10 homes of Madurese settlers were in flames, torched by Dayak mobs, but that they were empty, abandoned earlier in the week by Madurese fearful that the Sampit violence would spread.

In Sampit, 40 km south of Sampit, foreign journalists were told by a village chief that at least 15,000 Madurese had fled fresh killings there, and were hiding in the jungles.

The journalists, who had driven to Samuda from Sampit, saw several beheaded corpses on the road on their return journey that had not been there in the morning.

Sampit administration chief Mohamed Wahyudi said the official death toll in the violence which erupted last Sunday had risen to 270 at the last count.

At least 10,000 frantic refugees, many of whom had not eaten for days and were traumatised by a week of beheadings by marauding Dayak tribesmen, were still awaiting evacuation, Wahyudi said.

The Dayaks, armed with swords, arrows and blowguns, have had control of the town, hunting down Madurese, beheading some and burning and looting their houses.

He was speaking after some 4,000 refugees packed into a passenger ship at Sampit river dock for Java island Sunday morning, and another 4,000 had left on two navy landing craft overnight.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (R) waves goodbye to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, as he boards State One for departure from the presidential retreat of Camp David, in Thurmont, MD, on Saturday. At (L) is First Lady Laura Bush (seen from behind).

Civilians remains found in Grozny mass grave

AFP, Moscow

Russia officials in Chechnya said Sunday that dozens of bodies have been discovered in a mass grave on the outskirts of the capital Grozny.

"There are at least 11 (bodies), but we cannot be more precise because we think the bodies are mined so we are approaching this slowly," a Russian prosecutor's office official in Chechnya told AFP by telephone.

The Interfax news agency earlier reported that at least three bodies have already been identified -- including that of a 16-year-old boy who according to the report went missing in December last year.

Chechen sources were not immediately available for comment Sunday but rebel administration officials alleged Saturday that the victims were Chechen civilians who were rounded up and shot by the Russian troops.

The mass grave was discovered on the southeastern outskirts of Grozny near the Russian military headquarters stationed in the suburb of Khankala.