

EU creates new rapid reaction forces

AFP, Brussels

The European Union yesterday launched two new "battle group" rapid response forces, part of a growing number of such units able to rush to crisis zones worldwide.

France, Germany and Spain agreed to set up one such force, while Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia and Germany also signed an agreement to create another at a meeting of EU defence ministers in Brussels.

The force is a "concrete contribution to the rapid reaction capacities that the European Union has decided it wants to have," French Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie said on the sidelines of the Brussels talks.

The EU plans to have 13 rapid response "battle groups" in operation by 2007, and sees them as a major step in matching its economic and growing political strength with military muscle.

The 1,500-strong tactical groups, which will put flesh on long-standing EU plans to have an independent military capacity, will be able to be deployed within 15 days and remain on the ground for up to four months.

Alliot-Marie, who was accompanied by Spanish Defence Minister Jose Bono and junior German defence minister Peter Eickenboom, said such forces of "immediate intervention could help prevent a conflict from deteriorating."

Assembly dissolved for fresh Bihar polls

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Capping weeks of political uncertainty, the eastern Indian state of Bihar yesterday headed for fresh elections to its legislature, just two months after a similar exercise threw up a badly fractured verdict and no party or alliance could muster majority to form a government.

The federal cabinet at its meeting here late Sunday night recommended dissolution of the state assembly and President AP J. Abdul Kalam, who is now on an official visit to Moscow, has put his stamp of approval on the decision, Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil told reporters here.

The meeting of the cabinet headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took stock of the political situation in the wake of reports of an impending split in the 29-member legislature party of Lok Janashakti Party headed by India's Steel Minister Ramvilas Paswan and that majority of the rebellious MLAs would back a government in Bihar headed by BJP and its NDA ally Janata Dal (United).

Patil said the decision for fresh

election in Bihar was taken after a report from state governor and senior Congress leader Buta Singh, who had alleged horse-trading in efforts to put together a government, and the federal government's assessment of the political situation in the state.

After the results of the election to the 243-member Bihar assembly, held in February and March this year, came out with no party or combination of parties securing a majority needed to form the government. As a result, the state was brought under federal rule in March.

Although Bihar strongman and Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Laloo Prasad's party emerged as the largest single party with 75 seats, it could not form government because Lok Janashakti Party (LJP), a key constituent of India's ruling United Progressive Alliance, had refused to support it.

The LJP has consistently said it is willing to support a non-RJD and non-BJP government in Bihar if it is headed by a Muslim Chief Minister and anyone outside the family of Laloo Prasad and his family. However, RJD rejected the LJP proposal. The RJD and LJP are

bitter rivals in the fight for political turn in cast-ridden electoral scene of Bihar.

Paswan's policy of equi-distance from BJP and RJD was seen as a big stumbling block to ending the political deadlock in Bihar. With 29 MLAs, his party had come to be seen as holding the key to government formation in the state but with the dissolution of the assembly his dream of becoming a king-maker has come a cropper.

The BJP and JD (U) cried foul over the dissolution of the assembly terming it as a "murder of democracy" and a "shameless" act by the Congress-led federal government and threatened to resort to street protests against it.

But Congress, RJD and Left parties welcomed the decision for fresh polls saying there was no alternative to it, given the political situation in Bihar.

The decision for dissolution of Bihar assembly was taken after BJP and its allies, with the backing of 17 independent MLAs, had moved within striking distance of garnering majority with the help of LJP rebel legislators in the last two days.



Supporters of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) burn an effigy of the governor of Bihar, Sardar Boota Singh in Patna yesterday in protest against the dissolution of the Bihar legislative assembly by the Federal Government in New Delhi. Terming the dissolution of the Bihar Assembly as constitutional fraud, the NDA sought the immediate dismissal of State Governor Buta Singh and the appointment of a neutral and non-political person to take his place and to hold fresh elections as soon as possible.

Schroeder calls for early polls

REUTERS, AFP, Berlin

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder took a big gamble by calling for a national election a year early to enable his people to choose who best can lead them out of mass unemployment and stagnation.

Schroeder announced his high-risk strategy on Sunday after his Social Democrats (SPD) were booting out of office in the most populous German state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), a long-time left-wing bastion the party had ruled for 39 years.

A general election in Germany will take place on September 18 this year at the latest because Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder will present a motion of confidence in his government to parliament by July 1, officials said yesterday.

The party chief of Schroeder's Social Democratic Party (SPD), Franz Muenterting, said that July 1 was the last sitting of the Bundestag, or lower house of parliament, before the summer recess.

If the motion of confidence is rejected, German President Horst Koehler then has 21 days in which to dissolve parliament.

The general election must take place within 60 days of the dissolution of parliament.

Bringing forward the election by one year to this autumn carries huge risks for Schroeder, who has seen his ratings plunge as unemployment has surged to post-war highs and his economic reforms have failed to boost Europe's largest economy.

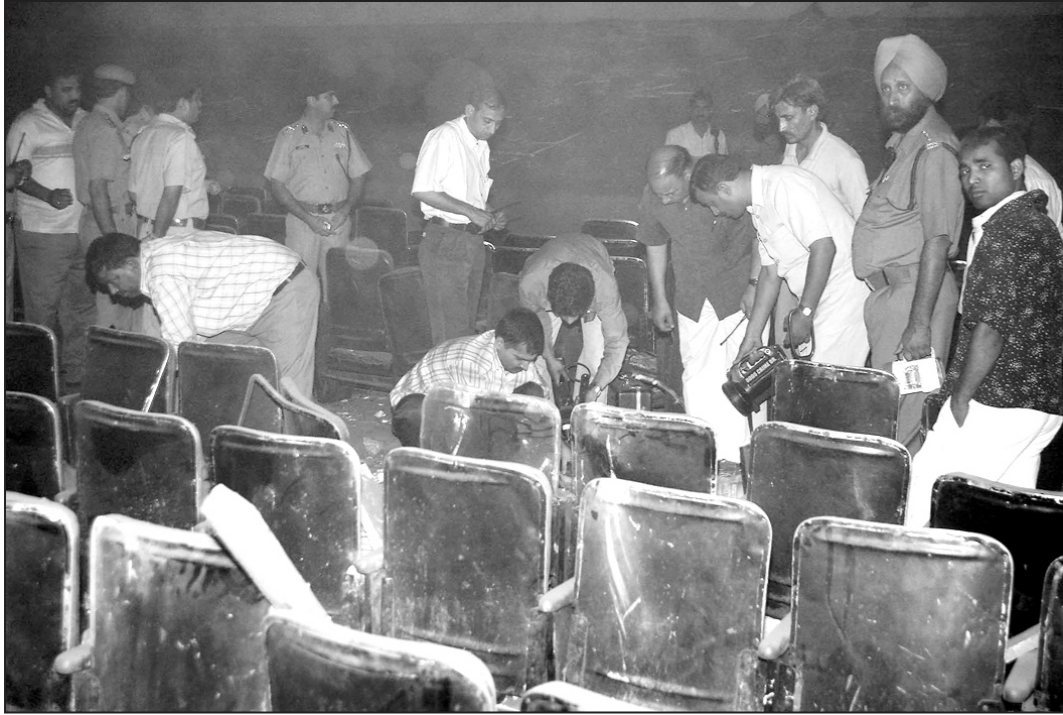
"It will be extremely difficult for him to come back, but it would have been more difficult a year down the road. That was his calculation," said Gary Smith, director of the American Academy, a Berlin think-tank.

Schroeder has now seized the initiative from the conservatives, but opinion polls show just how difficult is the challenge facing him in the next few months.

In a survey by ARD television on Sunday, 46 percent of respondents said they would vote for the rival conservative Christian Democrats (CDU), compared to 29 percent for the SPD.

Schroeder must convince Germans the conservatives, who have largely supported his efforts to reform Germany's welfare system and labour market, will push for even more painful measures.

Two years ago, Schroeder unveiled a reform package known as "Agenda 2010" that included cuts in jobless benefits and sparked protests across the country.



Police officers and cinema goers look at the damage to the interior of the Liberty Cinema Hall in New Delhi Sunday after a series of bombs exploded at cinema halls in the Indian capital. A series of blasts rocked two cinema halls in the Indian capital leaving one dead and dozens of others injured.

High alert in Delhi after bomb attacks Cinema blasts claim 1

REUTERS, New Delhi

India was on high alert yesterday, a day after bombs tore through two cinemas in the capital showing a film considered offensive by some Sikhs.

As police hunted the bombers, a small blast yesterday wounded one person in Delhi, where Sikh separatists carried out a wave of bombings in the 1980s.

No group has claimed responsibility for Sunday's blasts that killed one person and wounded dozens.

Police erected temporary barricades on Delhi's roads and put railway stations and airports on alert, but said there was no reason for panic.

Many theatres across the country pulled the film as Manmohan Singh, India's first Sikh prime minister, visited victims in hospital early on Monday.

The blasts, which ripped through cinemas packed with weekend crowds, occurred on the first anniversary of Singh's government.

The theatres were showing a film called "Jo Bole So Nihal", the title of which is part of a Sikh religious and battle cry that translates as "Blessed is the one who says God is eternal".

Some Sikhs had taken offence at the title of the Hindi film and to some scenes that showed characters entering Sikh temples without removing their shoes or covering their heads - considered sacrilege.

Analysts said violence was unlikely to escalate but security agencies would have to be on guard.

"If you have a cocktail of religion and ... violence you have to quarantine it quickly," C. Uday Bhaskar, head of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, told Reuters.

All reformists barred from Iranian polls

AP, Tehran

All reformists who registered to run in next month's presidential elections were rejected by Iran's hard-line constitutional watchdog, which approved only six out of the 1,010 hopefuls, state-run television reported.

The announcement Sunday prompted a crisis meeting by reformers, who immediately threatened to boycott the election.

"We are warning the Guardian Council that we will not participate in the election if it doesn't reverse its decision," Rajabali Mazrouei, a top member of the reformist Islamic Iran Participation Front, told The Associated Press.

"Barring reform candidates means there will be no free or fair election," he said.

There was similar outrage last year when the Council which supervises the elections disqualified more than 2,000 reformists from legislative elections, leading to a low turnout. Reformists denounced that vote as a "historical fiasco."

The council's announcement, however, appeared to be the final decision and effectively leaves

reformers seeking democratic changes without a candidate.

Ruling clerics are seeking to consolidate their power following the departure of President Mohammad Khatami, a reformist who is barred from seeking another term. Khatami came to power in a popular landslide in 1997, but hard-line clerics led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have succeeded in stifling his program for political and social reform.

The approved candidates for the June 17 presidential race included the powerful former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who moves frequently between the hard-line and more moderate camps and was seen as a front-runner.

Other approved candidates were former police chief Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf; former radio and television chief Ali Larjani; Tehran Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; former head of the elite Revolutionary Guards Mohtashem Rezaei; and former parliament speaker Mahdi Karroubi.

Karroubi has some support among reform-minded voters who remain loyal to the clerical establishment,

INDO-PAK PEACE Ray of hopes for troops on 'highest battlefield'

REUTERS, Islamabad

Too scared to come down lest the other stays, the armies of Pakistan and India have occupied and fought over the Siachen Glacier, high in the mountains of northern Kashmir, for the past 21 years.

A ceasefire has been in place across Kashmir since late 2003, and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has called the peace process "almost irreversible".

If the diplomatic thaw carries through to talks starting tomorrow in Islamabad it could bring about an overdue descent from the world's highest battlefield.

"There are hopeful signs of progress," said Niaz Naik, a retired Pakistani diplomat involved in the back-door diplomacy that led to the opening of a bus route across the Kashmiri ceasefire line in April.

But there will be little relief for soldiers keeping vigil on the glacier until the two governments show more trust. Summer arrived on Siachen this month. Temperatures rose to minus 10

degrees, after dropping to minus 40 in winter.

"Not even an enemy should have to go there. When I came back I felt I'd been granted life again," said ex-artillery gunner Mohammed Miskin, who served on Siachen with the Pakistan Army, almost two decades ago.

Miskin is still chilled by the memory of living in a battle zone standing between 18,000 and 22,000 feet, the breathlessness, the sores from snow burn, the isolation of living in bunkers cut from ice. His worst time was three days spent in a snow trench next to the corpse of a comrade hit in the neck by shrapnel.

But more men die from the extreme cold and life-sapping effects of reduced oxygen levels than from enemy fire in a place where artillery is rendered inaccurate by the thin air.

Others have lost their lives walking on the treacherous glacier, disappearing in crevasses hidden by fresh snowfalls or buried by avalanches that swept away patrols roped together for safety.

Pakistan invites Hurriyat leaders to visit country on June 2

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan today extended an invitation to all Hurriyat leaders, including hardline separatist leader Sayeed Ali Geelani to visit the country and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) on June 2 by the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus.

"We have extended an invitation to Hurriyat leaders to visit Pakistan on the bus on June 2. The people of Pakistan and government and the people of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, have been anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Hurriyat leaders to Pakistan and we hope that they would be able to make it this time. "A very warm welcome awaits the Hurriyat leaders," Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman Jalil Abbas Jilani said at a media briefing here.

To a question, he said the invitation to Hurriyat leaders included Geelani and discounted reports that Pakistan may not extend invitation to him due to his hardline stance on the peace process.

Geelani is well regarded in Pakistan and he has been extended the invitation along with others, he said.

Maoists bomb army spokesman's house Thousands of Nepalis demand end to royal rule

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoists have bombed the family home of Nepal's army spokesman, but his relatives escaped unhurt, official state-run radio announced yesterday.

Brigadier General Deepak Gurung's house in Kawasoti village, Nawalparasi district, south-western Nepal, was "badly damaged in the bomb attack," Radio Nepal said.

Some relatives were inside the house when the rebels attacked Saturday night but none were injured, according to the report.

Media reports said three suspected Maoists riding a motorcycle carried out the bombing before escaping.

Maoists also attacked Gurung's house two years ago, but no one was hurt.

Meanwhile, the army accused the Maoists of killing a seven-year-old girl asleep in her bed during an

attack at Dhangadhi, in the remote western district of Kailali on Saturday.

A Royal Nepalese Army statement said the rebels had opened fire "indiscriminately" on a security force patrol.

Also Saturday, a six-year-old boy died when a homemade bomb he found blew up at Toligaon, in the western district of Dadeldhura, the state-run Rising Nepal newspaper reported.

Meanwhile, more than 3,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Kathmandu Sunday calling for the restoration of democracy and an end to royal rule, defying warnings from the authorities not to criticise the king.

An alliance of seven political parties led the protests, the biggest since King Gyanendra sacked the government and assumed total control over the impoverished Himalayan nation on February 1.

BBC programmes hit as staff go on strike

AFP, London

Journalists and technical workers at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) staged a 24-hour strike yesterday over plans to cut 3,780 jobs, seriously disrupting programming at the world's biggest public broadcaster.

Striking staff had formed picket lines outside entrances to BBC buildings in London and union representatives using hand-held video cameras filmed the trickle of workers who ignored signs urging them not to cross the line.

The walkout which started Sunday at midnight (2300 GMT) was the first of four strikes set to hit the corporation, causing serious disruption across its radio and television output.

The flaship Today programme on Radio 4, which features interviews with politicians and other newsmakers, was an early casualty.

"I'm sorry that we are unable to bring you the Today programme. This is due to industrial action by the broadcast unions," said the announcer.

An entertainment program ran in its place.

The Internet BBC News site was still being updated after midnight without any perceptible change from normal practice.

BBC One's Breakfast ran a basic service with a single presenter, the website reported.

After midnight BBC News 24 and BBC World switched to recorded news bulletins, though they later resumed some live news broadcasting.

An omission on the 0700 bulletin was news of the devastating state election defeat for the Social Democrats of German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. The story appeared prominently on the corporation's website, however.



Placards are placed by striking employees on barriers outside BBC Television Centre in White City, London yesterday. Journalists and technical workers at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) are staging a 24-hour strike over plans to cut 3,780 jobs, seriously disrupting programming at the world's biggest public broadcaster.