

Thai police officers stand guard along a railway track in Thailand's restive southern Narathiwat province yesterday. Four railway staff were killed when separatist militants opened fire on a passenger train in Thailand's restive south on Saturday, an official said.

10,000 British soldiers unfit for frontline

AFP, London

More than 10,000 British soldiers are unfit for frontline duty as the pressure of supplying troops for years of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan takes its toll on the army, the Sunday Telegraph reported.

The newspaper said the Ministry of Defence admits that 8,500 soldiers from the 59,000-strong "Field Army" -- units such as tank, artillery and infantry regiments -- are classified as unfit to serve at the front.

When other soldiers classified as unfit from the overall 101,800-strong army are taken into account, the total figure is likely to exceed 10,000, said the newspaper, which is traditionally close to the armed forces.

The figure of one in 10 soldiers classified as unfit for operations is the highest since the start of the Iraq war in 2003. Britain has been Washington's staunchest ally in Iraq and about 4,000 British troops are currently based there.

Frustration in Gaza despite slight easing of blockade

AFP, Sufa Crossing

Dozens of Palestinian lorry drivers waited to load their goods in the scorching sun on Sunday as Israel said it had started to ease its blockade of Gaza on the fourth day of a truce in and around the territory.

About 50 trucks lined the road on the Gaza side of the Sufa crossing which has been used mainly for humanitarian supplies since Israel imposed crippling sanctions on Gaza after the Hamas takeover.

Some of the Gaza truckers said they had been waiting for more than 24 hours.

"We are told there is a ceasefire and the blockade will be lifted, but so far nothing. There's been no shooting for days, but still nothing has come in," said fruit trader Hani Abu Shanab, 40, who sought refuge from the relentless sun under his truck.

Israeli authorities had pledged to gradually ease the restrictions from Sunday as part of an Egyptian-mediated truce deal with Hamas, the Islamist movement that seized control of Gaza one year ago.

They said that during the day a total of 90 trucks laden with goods would pass through the Sufa border crossing which has been used mainly for humanitarian supplies since Israel imposed crippling sanctions on Gaza after the Hamas takeover.

Before the truce, an average of 60 trucks would be allowed in every day, Israeli officials said.

The process of delivering the badly needed goods into the impoverished sliver of land is painfully slow.

Israeli trucks drive up to the

border and unload the goods in an open area. Once they are gone, the Gaza truckers are allowed to drive up to the crossing to pick up their merchandise.

"The problem is the sun. The sun is going to ruin everything -- the fish, the fruit, the milk for the babies," said Abu Shanab, who grew increasingly frustrated as the hours passed and the heat kept rising.

On an average trip, he would lose about 3,000 shekels (850 dollars) as part of his shipment spoils in the sun.

The crippling embargo has taken a heavy toll on the 1.5 million population of Gaza, the majority of whom now depend on foreign aid. Abu Shanab's family is no exception -- three of his sons won't be able to get married anytime soon

"because they don't have work or materials to build their own place."

With nothing to do but wait, Abu Shanab played backgammon with a friend under his truck.

In mid-afternoon, a shout arose from the crowd of truckers -- the Gaza side of the border had just opened.

The Israelis said the restrictions were also eased at the Karni crossing further north, where a conveyor belt that carries corn, animal feed and coffee will now open six days a week, instead of only three.

Zimbabwe opposition chief quits run-off polls

ZANU-PF youth militias occupy site of opposition rally

AFP, AP, Harare

Zimbabwe opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai quit the country's bitterly fought run-off election on Sunday, saying the vote cannot be free and fair.

"We in the MDC cannot ask them to cast their vote on the 27th when that vote would cost them their lives," Tsvangirai told reporters.

"We will no longer participate in the violent illegitimate sham of an election process."

The opposition chief said President Robert Mugabe had "declared war by saying that the bullet has replaced the ballot."

"We believe an election that reflects the will of the people is impossible," he said.

Tsvangirai was to face Mugabe in Friday's run-off, and the decision likely hands the veteran president victory.

Earlier militants from Zimbabwe's ruling party have occupied the site of the opposition party's main pre-election rally.

The Movement for Democratic Change says thousands of armed members of the ZANU-PF youth militia are at Harare's showgrounds. Witnesses say they are pulling down posters of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

Tsvangirai is meant to have his main rally at the showgrounds, ahead of next Friday's presidential runoff against President Robert Mugabe. Tsvangirai won the first round but not by an absolute majority. More than 60 people, mostly opposition supporters, have been killed ahead of the vote.

Police tried to ban Sunday's rally, but a court overturned the ban on Saturday. It is unclear whether Tsvangirai will try to press ahead regardless of the notoriously violent youth militia.

The MDC has shown signs of deep divisions in recent days on whether to contest the vote amid violence it claims has left some 70 supporters dead since the first round of the poll on March 29.

Earlier this month, Tsvangirai said 200 people were unaccounted for and a further 3,000 had been hospitalised.

The party has also faced major obstacles in seeking to campaign, including Tsvangirai being detained five times and the party's number two leader, Tendai Biti, in jail on subversion and vote-rigging charges and facing the death penalty.

Despite that, the party's secretary for legal affairs Innocent Goneshe has told AFP that "withdrawing will not solve anything."

MDC treasurer general Roy Bennett has described suggestions of pulling out of the race as "non-sense."

Iran warns of 'limitless' response to any military strike

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday dismissed reports that Israel had been practising for air strikes against its nuclear drive as "psychological operations" but warned of a limitless response to any attack.

The New York Times on Friday cited US officials as saying that a major Israeli military exercise over Greece earlier this month appeared to be a dry run for a potential strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.

"It seems that a series of psychological operations have been taken to intimidate the Islamic republic and force it to renounce its absolute and legitimate right" to nuclear power, Defence Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar said.

"But Iran will not be intimidated by these threats and will not renounce its right," he added, quoted by the Fars news agency.

The United States and its ally Israel fear that Iran could use its programme of uranium enrichment

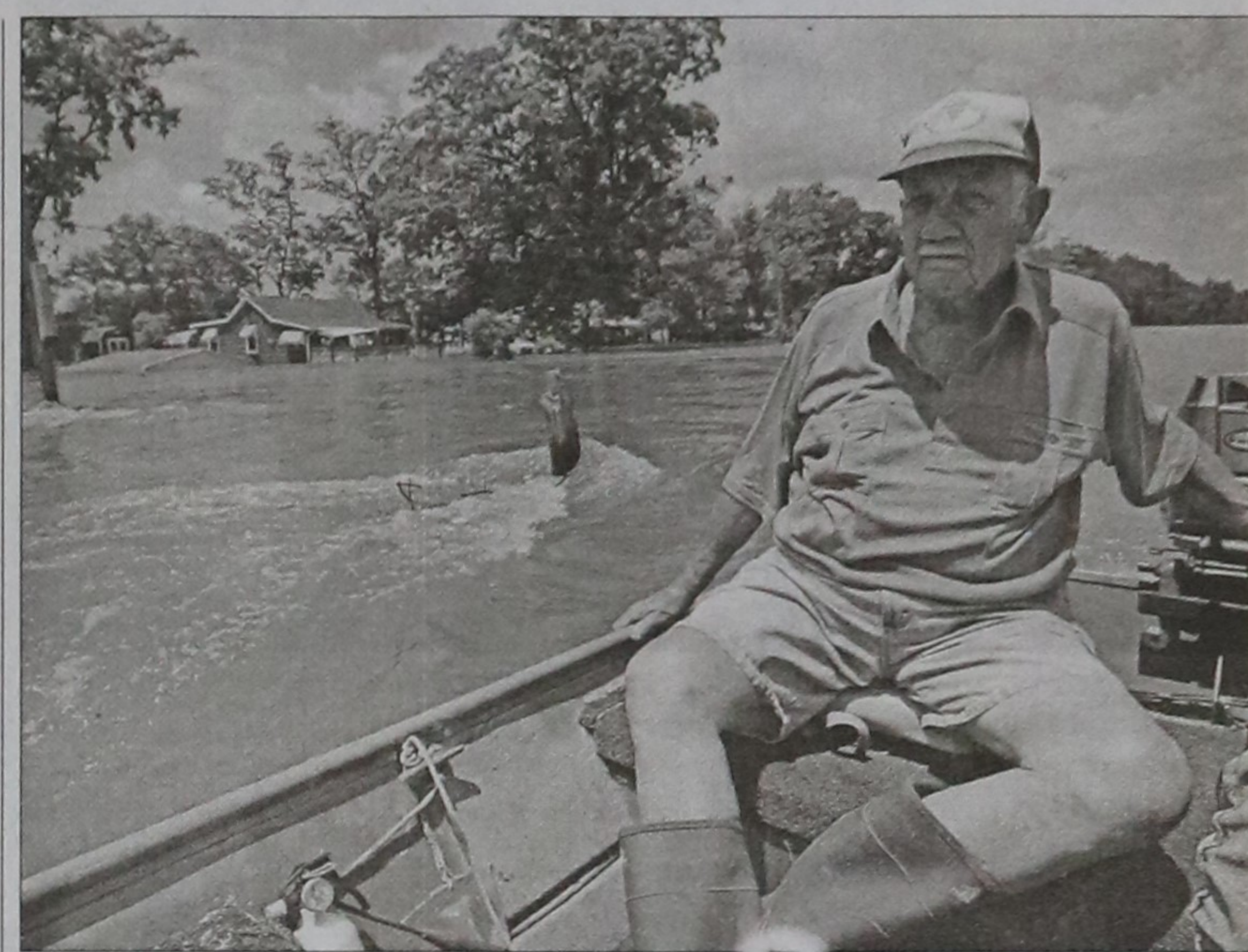
to make an atomic weapon, and have never explicitly ruled out launching a military strike against it.

An official with the Greek air force's central command confirmed the substance of the report, stating that it had taken part in "joint training exercises" with Israel off the Mediterranean island of Crete.

"Iran will not begin any conflict but will punish any aggressor with force. With determination and using all the options -- without limit in time and space -- we will give a destructive response to any hostile action," Najjar said.

His comments came after the UN atomic watchdog chief Mohamed ElBaradei warned on Saturday that an attack on Iran would turn the region into a "ball of fire."

Israeli parliament foreign affairs and defence committee chairman Tzahi Hanegbi said on Saturday that Western diplomatic efforts to halt Iran's nuclear programme had failed and "next year and the year after that will be crucial."



Linus Uelentrop boats past his riverfront home in the floodwaters of the Mississippi River on Saturday in Winfield, Missouri. Flooding continues in Iowa, Missouri and Illinois with cresting taking place in many of the affected areas.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Snap polls a mere possibility in India

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Early general election is a mere possibility in India despite the standoff between India's Congress-led government and its Left allies over Indo-US nuclear deal and sudden withdrawal of support by Mayawati-led BSP.

While constituents of the coalition government have backed the deal, they have made it clear to top leadership of Congress, heading the alliance at the Centre since May 2004, that they do not favour early elections. Nor is Congress enthusiastic about early election, which is set for May next year in normal course.

The reason is simple. Congress and its alliance partners do not want to take the risk of early polls fearing voters backlash against the double digit inflation, which reached 11.5 percent. The high inflation has already contributed in a big way to a series of electoral defeats Congress suffered in elections

to legislatures in a number of states in the last one year, say political analysts and sources.

This has heightened the dilemma for Congress. While it has firmly backed the Indo-US nuclear deal, it is not sure if it wants to sacrifice the government prematurely in the event of the Left parties withdrawing their support, which have 59 members in Lok Sabha, they say.

Leaders of Congress' coalition partners have gone on record to say that they want both the deal as well as the Left parties' support to continue. But can this two apparently contradictory strains co-exist? And, if so, how long? wonder political analysts.

RJD leader Lalu Prasad Yadav, NCP chief Sharad Pawar and BJP leader Ram Vilas Paswan have urged Congress and Left parties to find a way to resolve their differences on the nuclear deal.

Even the Left parties are not too keen to have early parliamentary elections because they are not sure

about the results even in their own strongholds -- West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura states as they had suffered setbacks in panchayat polls in West Bengal recently. They are also worried about the inflation fallout as the outside supporters of the government for the last four years, analysts say.

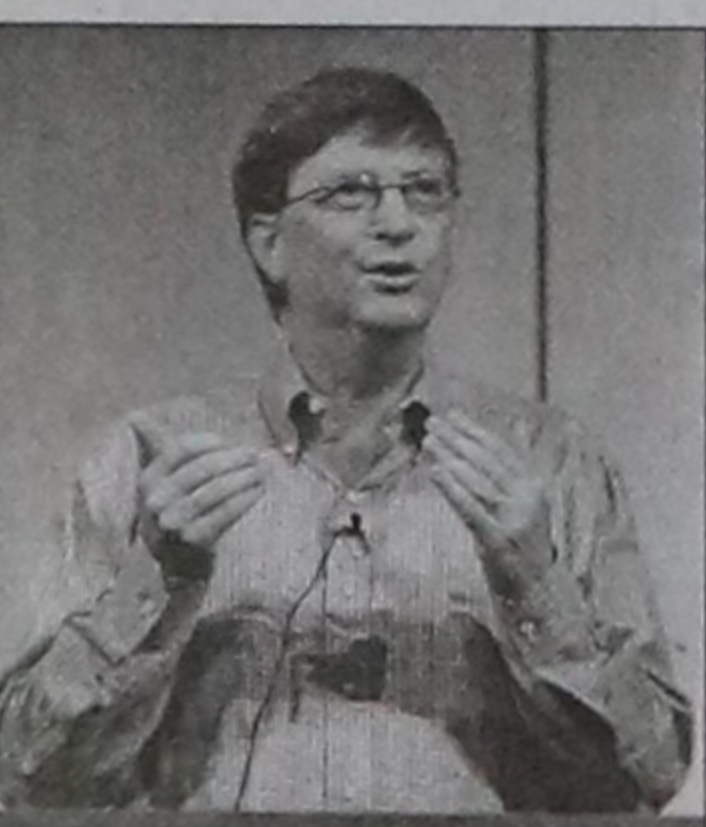
It was not for the first time that the government and the Left had come close to what looks like a breaking point. In August 2007 too, they had come nearly to the brink after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a staunch advocate of the nuclear deal, had indicated his resolve to take on the Left.

The question widely doing the rounds in political circles here is that will a minority government survive if the Left withdraws support? There is no clarity if the Left would support a no-confidence motion if brought by main opposition BJP. After all, the previous minority Congress government headed by PV Narasimha Rao had survived for

five years from 1991 to 1996.

Congress is now looking up to Samajwadi Party (SP) led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, which has 39 members in Lok Sabha. The SP has extended support to UPA since May 2004 despite strained ties between Congress and SP till a few months back. Of late, however, there has been a growing bonhomie between the two parties, a development that is believed to have contributed at least partly to BSP's withdrawal of support to the Congress-led government. After all, SP and BSP are arch-rivals in the key state of Uttar Pradesh now ruled by Mayawati government.

However, will SP bail out a Congress in the event of a crisis? Mulayam Singh Yadav's party has close ties with the Left. Will it antagonise the Left by siding with the Congress if the Left withdraws support to the UPA government? Politics is the art of the impossible and Congress is clearly banking on that once again.



Bill Gates surrendering Microsoft helm

AFP, San Francisco

A Harvard University dropout who ushered in the home computer age and made billions of dollars along the way will have his last official day of work at Microsoft on June 27.

Three people will essentially fill the void left behind when Bill Gates retires from the company he and friend Paul Allen co-founded in 1975.

Since Gate's began his transition from leading Microsoft to heading his personally-bankrolled charity, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, his job as chief software architect has been handled by Ray Ozzie.

Craig Mundie inherited Gate's chief research and strategy officer duties, while former Harvard classmate Steve Ballmer became chief executive officer at the Seattle-based software colossus.

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