The Bruns

International

In the last week or so . . .

Falun Gong leader denied asylum

HAGATNA, Guam (AP) - A federal judge ruled the leader of a sect banned in China can remain in the United States but denied his request for political asylum, the man's lawyer said.

Zhang Hongbao has been held on Guam since February after eluding a nationwide manhunt in China. China has requested his extradition from the U.S. territory 3,800 miles west of Hawaii.

Zhang's attorney, Charles Kinnunen, said his client was denied asylum Thursday because of legal technicalities. But the court granted Zhang permission to remain on Guam under U.N. conventions, Kinnunen said.

Kinnunen said he will appeal the asylum denial within 30 days.

Zhang was returned to Department of Corrections custody Thursday following a third day of proceedings at the U.S. Immigration Court in Hagatna.

Zhang founded the Zhong Gong sect in 1987, and millions practiced its exercises.

Chinese leaders began rounding up leaders of Zhong Gong shortly after banning the better-known Falun Gong in July 1999. Both groups have attracted millions of followers with a mix of exercise and meditation.

Germany to resume development aid to Indian, Pakistan

BERLIN (AP) - Germany said Friday it is resuming development aid cooperation with India and Pakistan that was frozen in 1998 after both countries tested nuclear weapons.

Germany expects to make new commitments for aid projects in both countries next year "with the perspective of normalizing cooperation step by step," the Development Aid Ministry said. Pakistan and India both have been major recipients of German aid for decades.

India and the 15-nation European Union agreed to increase cooperation at a June summit in Lisbon, Portugal, where India also stressed its readiness to ratify a nuclear test ban treaty, the ministry statement said.

Development Minister Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul said Germany's normalization of aid ties was aimed at supporting those political forces in India and Pakistan who support the test ban treaty and want to lower tensions between the two countries. (tc-bh)

Somali gunmen release aid workers

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) - Somali gunmen released two European aid workers unharmed Monday after holding them hostage for 55 days.

Francoise Deutsch, 46, of France, and Jonathan Ward, 31, of England, were kidnapped July 26 by armed raiders who stormed the office of the French aid agency, Action Against Hunger, in the Somali capital.

A convoy of pickup trucks, armed with anti-aircraft guns, carried Deutsch and Ward to a hotel, where they released Monday.

"We have been given enough food and water, and we have been treated well," said Ward, who was dressed in a traditional "mawiss," a sarong-like garment worn by Somalians.

He told reporters he and Deutsch had been held together in a "tiny room" in a heavily fortified building somewhere in south Mogadishu. "I will not be discouraged from my work with humanitarian efforts worldwide," he added.

Somalia descended into chaos after opposition leaders joined forces to oust dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991. Factional leaders then fought with each other, turning the nation of 7 million into battling fiefdoms ruled by heavily armed militias.

Action Against Hunger is one of the few international humanitarian organizations to remain in Somalia. Others pulled out after a U.N. force left in 1995 because of insecurity and the threat of kidnapping.

Deutsch, looking tired and wearing the flowing veils worn by Somali women, said her biggest worry had been the absence of news during their captivity.

Local businessmen said they had secured their "unconditional release."

"These efforts have been made to erase the bad image of Mogadishu," said Omar Sheik Ali, speaking on behalf of the businessmen.

Action Against Hunger issued a statement saying the agency had had no direct contact with the kidnappers, relying on "traditional" Somali negotiations to secure the release of their volunteers.

The agency said it wanted to emphasize that "it had paid no ransom to obtain the freedom of its two volunteers."

The agency said it was concerned about the increasing difficulty of carrying out humanitarian work in Mogadishu. It would not discuss the future of its projects in Somalia before further studying situation.

Reports in Mogadishu indicated Monday that a payment of as much as $80,000 may have been made to the kidnappers by the businessmen.

In its statement Action Against Hunger thanked Somalia's President Abdiqasim Salad Hassan and the international community.

In recent weeks, there has been hope that stability could be restored to Somalia following the last month's inauguration of Hassan and a new 245-member Parliament.

Ward and Deutsch were expected to leave Mogadishu for the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, on Tuesday.

U.N. refuses deployment in Congo

UNITED NATIONS (AP) - The United Nations ruled out deployment of U.N. military observers to Congo for at least two more months on Friday because of increased fighting, obstruction from the government and its call to revise the country's peace agreement.

In a report to the Security Council, Secretary-General Kofi Annan also questioned whether the 250 preliminary troops already deployed in Congo and surrounding countries should remain because of the deteriorating situation in Congo and fears for their security.

He recommended the council extend the mandate of the mission for just two months to give the warring factions time to demonstrate their commitment to the peace process and show that the conditions for the deployment of 500 military observers, backed by 5,000 troops and support staff, had been met.

Annan said that lack of progress in the peace process would make it difficult to justify troop presence and additional deployment in the Congo. "It is clear that United Nations peacekeeping operations cannot serve as a substitute for the political will to achieve a peaceful settlement," he said.

Congo's peace process began unraveling soon after it was signed last year, with repeated violations of the cease-fire that have increased recently with intense fighting in Equateur province and North and South Kivu provinces between the government and rebel forces backed by Rwanda and Uganda.

The government of President Laurent Kabila, meanwhile, has created a series of obstacles that have held up U.N. deployment, including an anti-U.N. propaganda campaign.

The government has most recently questioned the validity of the cease-fire agreement and called for its revision — a move that could seriously complicate the U.N. mission since it was authorized specifically to monitor the agreement as it was signed in Lusaka, Zambia, last year by the rebels and their backers and Kabila and his backers Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia.

As a result of the problems, the United Nations has undertaken an entire reassessment of the U.N. Mission in Congo.

Timor militiamen want weapons

ATAMBUA, Indonesia (AP) - A tense standoff marred the disarming of militiamen in West Timor on Sunday as they angrily demanded the return of their weapons after Indonesia's visiting vice president refused to speak with them about their future.

The militias had surrendered hundreds of weapons Saturday in the first step of what Indonesia and the international community hope will be a total disarmament.

On Sunday, militiamen attacked policemen, grabbed 13 automatic rifles they had earlier surrendered, then threatened to shoot security officers. They waved guns in the faces of policemen and soldiers before marching through the town to a local police station and demanded the return of hundreds of other weapons.

"Give us back our weapons!" several of the militiamen shouted. The police refused.

After about an hour, security forces managed to persuade the militiamen to surrender the guns at a local military barracks and drive out of town. No one was injured.

The standoff happened after Indonesia's Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri visited Atambua on Sunday to witness the handover. When militiamen tried to speak with her, she refused to meet them.

One of the militiamen, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the groups would stop handing in their weapons unless the government discusses their future.

Indonesia is now under intense pressure to clamp down on the militiamen. The militias are intent on destabilizing U.N.-administered East Timor's transition to self-rule and preventing 120,000 East Timorese refugees languishing in squalid camps in West Timor from returning home. East Timor voted last year to break away from Indonesia, setting off a wave of violence by anti-independence militias. West Timor is part of Indonesia.

Last week, U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen warned that Indonesia risked losing international financial assistance if it fails to immediately disband the armed groups. By Sunday, the militias had voluntarily surrendered 34 automatic rifles, nine grenade launchers, about 1,000 homemade weapons and about 1,000 rounds of ammunition.

Leading exporters plan to boycott sale of "Blood diamonds"

PRETORIA, South Africa (AP) - Representatives of the world's leading diamond exporting, processing and importing countries agreed last Thursday to develop a plan to keep diamonds mined by rebel groups off the international market.

Under the plan, all diamonds sold on the world market would have to be accompanied by a certificate confirming their origins.

The plan aims to prevent so-called "blood diamonds" — gems sold by rebels to finance conflicts — from entering the legitimate market. Diamonds have helped finance the conflicts in Sierra Leone, Angola and the Congo.

"The agreement we have decided upon today is actually a lifeline out of a situation in which people could feel that they were unable to distinguish between diamonds from conflicts such as Sierra Leone and Angola and diamonds legitimately mined," said Peter Hain, Britain's foreign minister for Africa.

The agreement came at the end of a three-day conference on ending the trade in conflict diamonds that was attended by ministers and representatives from 20 countries, including the United States, Russia, Canada and Great Britain. The officials agreed to co-sponsor a resolution to be presented to the U.N. General Assembly before December and said they hoped a world treaty could be created next year.

Estimates on the rebels' share of the $6 billion-a-year international diamond trade range from 4 percent to 15 percent.

Participants in the conference emphasized, however, that diamonds were also vital resources for stable countries such as Namibia and Botswana, and the diamond industry employed tens of thousands of workers.

The work to halt the illicit diamond trade would not wait for the ratification of a treaty, Hain said. Diamond industry representatives and nations involved in the diamond trade would begin working to stop the sale of conflict diamonds as soon as possible, Hain said.

The work was necessary, not only to stop the flow of money to rebel groups, but also to restore consumer confidence in the gems and ensure the survival of the diamond industry, Hain said.

The United Nations already has banned the purchase of diamonds from rebels in Angola and Sierra Leone. There is no ban affecting the Congo.

The certification scheme would largely be financed by countries involved in the trade, said Phunzile Mlambo-Ngucke, South Africa's minister for minerals and energy. Conference participants hoped the United Nations would contribute money, she said.

Junta shake-up in Ivory Coast

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (AP) - Supporters of Ivory Coast's opposition leader camped by the hundreds in front of his house Saturday, praying, cooking and sleeping in his yard to shield him from the increasingly aggressive military junta.

If forces of junta leader Gen. Robert Guei do come for Alassane Dramane Ouattara, they'll have to go through the market women first.

"We will be the shield on which they will smash themselves," said Sangare Namizata, who left her two 4-year-old children at home eight days ago to stand guard before Ouattara's home.

"They will not touch a hair on his head," insisted Edwidge Koffi, a saleswoman in gray dress and matching purse.

Tensions have been building daily in the West African nation in anticipation of an announcement on whether Ouattara, a former premier and International Monetary Fund official, will be permitted to run against Guei in promised Oct. 22 elections to return the country to civilian rule.

Guei rose to power during a Christmas Eve 1999 military coup, the first in Ivory Coast's 40-year history. Two smaller military uprisings have followed, shaking the reputation of stability that had made Ivory Coast the financial center of West Africa.

The political trouble worsened Monday, when the government announced it had beaten back an assassination attempt by mutineers in Guei's own presidential guard. Security forces have arrested scores since then, mostly soldiers.

Some suspect the alleged attempt was an elaborate ruse to justify a pre-election crackdown on Guei's rivals.

Ouattara's supporters started setting up camp outside the high cement walls around his luxurious white villa a little over a week ago, after military vehicles started cruising past the house and rumors spread of his imminent arrest.

Men and women traveled for hours or days from Ivory Coast's remote interior to the pole-and-tarp shantytown that has sprung up in one of Abidjan's most elegant neighborhoods, against the distant backdrop of the city's downtown office buildings.

"I'm here to protect him, because he's a good man," said Awa Traore, hunched in printed cloth and headwrap over aluminum pans of stew and meat on charcoal burners.

Well over 500 people sleep there on some nights, with many more on alert in homes in cities and towns around the capital in case of trouble, supporters said.

Many expect Ivory Coast to bar Ouattara from running for the presidency, and fear that could be one of many triggers that could set off the violence threatening here.

The crisis has split Ivory Coast along ethnic and regional lines, with Ouattara drawing much of his support from his native north. Late Friday, Guei shed his junta's No. 2 and 3 officials, both northerners.

Guei gave no explanation for the shake-up, which also saw the departure of a lower-ranked official from the south.

Ten African heads of state are to discuss the country's growing instability in a summit set for Sunday in nearby Lome, Togo. It is the second Organization of African Unity summit in nine months on Ivory Coast, valued by African leaders as a center of calm and relative prosperity in a troubled region.

Guei has forbidden Ouattara and other opposition leaders to attend the summit or leave the country, and says he himself is too busy to attend, Ivory Coast newspapers said Saturday.

France, Ivory Coast's former colonial ruler, recently increased its military presence in the nation from 550 to 680, and has a ship with the capacity to evacuate 3,000 people stationed offshore, French Defense Ministry spokesman Luc Jouvence said Saturday in Paris.

Jouvence said the increased military presence had nothing to do with the heightening tensions in Ivory Coast. France has 25,000 nationals in Ivory Coast.

Ivory Coast junta leader Gen. Robert Guei, right, speaks to a bodyguard during a news conference in Abidjan, Ivory Coast Monday, Sept. 18.

Right-wing paramilitaries suspected

Columbian peasants massacred

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) - Peasant farmers who were shot and hacked to death with machetes in a northern village are believed to have been the victims of rightist militias, police and army officials said Saturday.

Gunmen wearing military-style uniforms attacked Nain, a poor village in the mountains of Cordoba State, on Wednesday.

The army said Saturday it had confirmed seven deaths, the bodies brought by mule and horseback to the nearby town of Tierralta. A local priest said Friday up to 30 people had been killed in the attack.

The attack on Nain appeared to be the work of a right-wing paramilitary group, the United-Self Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC, said Maj. David Yaruro of the army's Eleventh Brigade based in the nearby city of Monteria. Cordoba province is an AUC stronghold.

The army had said Friday that two separate massacres by gunmen took place in the area, but Yaruro said he was aware only of the one in Nain.

Vigilantes have targeted peasants before in the farming and ranching region as they hunted for sympathizers of leftist guerrilla groups who extort money from large landowners and kidnap them.

The victims, ranging in age from 16 to 65, were apparently killed on suspicion that they were guerrilla collaborators, Monteria police said in a statement.

Difficult terrain and clashes in Cordoba State prevented troops from reaching the area, Yaruro said. Nain is about a three-hour drive from Tierralta, along steep and unpaved mountain roads. Tierralta is about 330 miles north of Bogota.

Guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary forces clashed Saturday in the area, adding to the troops' difficulty in reaching Nain. The leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, the country's largest rebel group, is trying to re-establish itself in the area, which was seized by militia several years ago, Yaruro said.

The AUC is estimated to have about 6,000 combatants and has links to government security forces. Many AUC fighters are former government soldiers. The AUC is paid by landowners for protection services, and makes money by taxing Colombia's drug trade.

Paramilitary violence is a sensitive issue in relations between Colombia and the United States. A $1.3 billion anti-drug aid package for the South American country is conditioned on government progress in dismantling the militias and severing army ties to them.

Czech finance minister accused of perjury

PRAGUE, Czech Republic (AP) - Czech Finance minister Vladimir Mertlik on Friday denied accusations of perjury after parliamentary commission officials said he had lied under oath about the sale of a bank that was seized at gunpoint.

The controversy emerged during an inquiry into the government-forced sale of the private IPB bank to the Belgian conglomerate KBC.

On June 16, masked and armed police took over the IPB headquarters and the bank was handed over to KBC in two days with unlimited government guarantees to cover shaky loans.

The move was criticized by Czech opposition as a violation of due process and Mertlik was accused of taking sides in the process.

Adding a political dimension to the dispute, opposition leader Vaclav Klaus called the sale a "robbery in broad daylight," favoring a private financial institution at the expense of ordinary taxpayers.

Miroslav Kalousek, chief of the parliamentary commission investigating the case, on Thursday accused Mertlik of perjury, saying he withheld crucial information during parliamentary hearing.

According to Kalousek, the IPB takeover was officially discussed by Central Bank officials and Mertlik before May 30, implying premeditated action.

Mertlik told reporters Friday that when he said he had seen no documents on the sale, he was referring to official government statements. Mertlik said he had seen draft materials but did not discuss them because he did not consider those to be official documents.

"Of course I didn't lie, and I shall see what steps I will take," Merlik told a news conference.