

4 killed in Calcutta clashes

NEW DELHI, Mar 12: Maoist activists clashed with Marxist marchers near Calcutta, leaving at least four people dead and several others injured, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported Monday, states AFP.

Among the dead was a country leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), PTI said, adding that the violence flared Sunday when Maoist activists who subscribe to violent revolution attacked a political rally of moderate Marxists in the village of Parasia.

Thai Junta to form parliament next week

BANGKOK, Mar 12: A military-dominated national assembly will next week replace the civilian parliament that was dissolved in a coup d'etat last month, a Thai army spokesman said Monday, reports AFP.

The Junta will name some 200 to 300 people, mostly soldiers and some politicians of the deposed civilian government, to the parliament, the spokesman quoted Army Chief General Suchinda Kraprayoon as saying.

Saddam briefed on latest developments

Iraqi city Irbil falls to rebels, government-in-exile shortly

NICOSIA, Mar 12: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, his army routed and his rule challenged by rebellion, chaired a meeting on Monday of his Revolution Command Council (RCC) and ruling Baath Party, reports Reuters.

The radio, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), said the joint meeting heard a report submitted by RCC Vice-Chairman Izzat Ibrahim on a tour of the governorates of Wasit and Maysan. The two areas are said by travellers, Iraqi exiles and western intelligence reports to be scene of heavy fighting between forces loyal to Saddam and Muslim Shi'ites who want to set up an Iranian-style Islamic state in Iraq.

Kurdish rebels captured the northern Iraqi city of Irbil after fierce battles with troops loyal to President Saddam Hussein, Kurdish exiles said on Monday.

Irbil is now totally under the control of Peshmerga (Kurdish guerrillas), said Hajj Salih Hussein, a leader of Iraqi Kurdish refugees in this southeastern Turkish city. He told Reuters he had received the information by telephone from the Iran-based headquarters of 17 anti-Saddam Kurdish groups linked in an Iraqi opposition front.

In Damascus, a spokesman for the National Kurdish Union said rebels won control of Irbil, nearly 300 km (200 miles) north of Baghdad, on Monday morning.

The Kurdish exile claims could not be independently confirmed. AP from Beirut says: Iraqi opposition leaders on Monday urged religious leaders around the world to demand that Saddam Hussein's forces stop "massacring" rebels waging an 11-day-old insurrection inside Iraq.

About 325 opposition figures from 23 factions, including Communists, Arab nationalists and Shi'ite Muslim fundamentalists, began a three-day conference in Beirut to plot Saddam's overthrow.

Opposition members also agreed on that a "democratic, federal Iraq" should be created after Saddam's fall, Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, said late Monday. Conference also planned to discuss "creating an Iraqi parliament-in-exile and government-in-exile," said Ali al-Adib, politburo member of the Shi'ite Muslims Dawa, or Call Party.

Al-Adib said the conferees "hope to achieve total solidarity among the Iraqi opposition factions to face the tyrant Saddam."

The rebellion began in the southern Iraqi city of Basra March 1 after Saddam's army had been defeated by a US-led coalition that freed Kuwait. Rebels claim they are about to take control of northern Iraqi oilfields, but say Saddam's troops are "massacring" rebels and civilians in the holy city of Karbala.

Shi'ite Muslim leader Ayatollah Taqi al-Mudarrisi, speaking to reporters as the Iraqi rebels gathered at the heavily guarded Bristol Hotel in west Beirut, said he had asked for foreign religious intervention to help stop the troops.

"I have sent letters to the world's religious leaders, including the Pope, to prevent Saddam's criminal regime from massacring the Iraqi people," he said, adding that there is a "strong possibility that Saddam would use chemical weapons to quell the uprising in Karbala and other parts of Iraq."

Fahd stresses peaceful Haj

RIYADH Mar 12: The Ministry of Pilgrimage and Endowments has emphasised the keen interest of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as per the directives of custodian of the two holy mosques, King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz and Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, that every pilgrim would perform Haj rituals in peace and security, reports SPA.

11,000 more Jews being settled in Palestine

TEL AVIV, Mar 12: Israel, running the risk of more anger in Washington, has launched a programme to house at least 11,000 immigrants in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, a Housing Ministry report says, states Reuter.



Rebels holed up in Karbala mosques

Ramadan killed by guards when he opened fire on Saddam?

NICOSIA, Mar 12: Baghdad's state-run newspapers reported Monday that Saddam's closest aides are touring the trouble-torn provinces seeking to rally the military, the ruling Baath Party apparatus and civilians against what they portray as a US-Israeli conspiracy to topple the government, reports AP.

he said in a statement: "An Iraqi intelligence major who was captured in Basra yesterday asserted that he carried Ramadan's body in his arms."

Saddam put Majid in charge of combatting the unrest last week. Majid is known as "the butcher of the Kurds" for leading a military campaign against them three

years ago, killing thousands in poison gas attacks. He was also governor of Kuwait during Iraq's 7-month occupation.

The Kurds have battled for years seeking autonomy for their mountainous homeland. Iraq's Shiites make up about 20 per cent of the country's 17 million population. The Shiites, who live mainly in the south, form a 55 per cent majority.

Saddam's ruling elite is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, a sect which totals about 40 per cent of Iraq's people, including most Kurds. Meanwhile, Shiite Muslim

rebels were holed up in mosques in the holy city of Karbala under shelling and tank and artillery fire from President Saddam Hussein's troops, opposition leaders reported Monday.

Lok Sabha clears way for possible polls

NEW DELHI, Mar 12: Parliament rushed through an emergency budget and other urgent business Monday to clear the way for possible elections caused by Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar's resignation, reports AP.

Off the Record

Bush produces ID card to prove he's President

ARLINGTON (Virginia): Pre-sident George Bush pulled out his driver's license and a credit card Monday to prove his identity to a skeptical 8-year-old, reports AP.

Bush, for several minutes, had read some schoolwork aloud to Anthony Henderson in the Barcroft Elementary School library.

Then the boy looked at the man who had swept into the school with a retinue of Secret Service agents and White House aides and asked, "Are you really the president?"

"Yeah. Didn't you know that?" said a nonplussed Bush. "What did you think I was - a pre-tending guy?"

"Well, heck, how can I prove that to you?" Bush asked.

The president pulled out a black wallet and started digging.

"There's my driver's license. Can you read what that says? B-U-S-H," said Bush, who had come to the school to honor the Marines who tutor Anthony and other Barcroft pupils.

"Bush, George," the boy read.

"George Herbert," the president added.

"So you are the president," the youngster said.

"Are you sure?" the president parried. "Because I might have some other evidence."

He fished out a picture of a grandson playing baseball and a snapshot of a granddaughter.

"How about, do you accept American Express cards?" said Bush, brandishing his green credit card while the Marines and other grown-ups in the room broke out laughing.

"I'll tell you how I can prove it. There's a great big black limousine car out there," said Bush.

Then he thought of something else. An aide alerted up with a wad of pre-signed autograph cards with the presidential seal.

"Oh, here's a way to do it. That's an autograph card. You can take it home to your mom," said the president.

"The thatcher said we can't take autographs," announced Anthony.

"Don't tell her I gave it to you," replied Bush.

He distributed cards to the other seven children, each of whom had a Marine tutor from Henderson Hall, the US Marine Corps Headquarters battalion, which "adopted" Barcroft Elementary School eight years ago.

Bush made the brief foray into Virginia to honor the Marine volunteers as his 400th daily Point of Light. Thirty Marines visit the school each week to work individually with students like Anthony.

Later, Bush told a crowded school assembly that their "Marine Buddies" are heroes, just like the Marines who helped liberate Kuwait.

A reporter asked Anthony just who he thought Bush was.

"A different person. Make-believe," the boy replied.

Maggie yet to adjust to shock of exit

NEW YORK: Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher says she hasn't adjusted to the "shock" of leaving office, reports AP.

"Even now, when we're driving down Whitehall toward Westminster or to go home, which is not very far away, all of a sudden my mind still thinks, 'Well, turn into Downing Street. And then I realize we're not going to,'" she told Barbara Walters in a "20-20" interview to be aired Friday night.

"The telephone goes and immediately you think, 'Oh, goodness me, the United Nations is sitting...' And then you realize that it's no longer you anymore," said Mrs. Thatcher. "I remember hearing when the tanks had gone into Vilnius. I kind of leapt up and dialed the telephone. Then I realized it was no longer me any more."



KUWAIT CITY: A veiled Kuwaiti woman holds up an American flag 11 Mar as she and hundreds of others join in the daily sunset ritual of celebrating the two week old liberation of Kuwait in front of the US Embassy

BRIEFLY

Where's govt, ask Kuwaitis: How come there's no electricity? Why hasn't the emir returned? Is democracy coming? reports AP.

As the euphoria of liberation subsides, Kuwaitis are growing restless for a return to normalcy and some feel the government has been slow and ineffective in addressing issues both mundane and fundamental.

"The government hasn't done anything. We can't rely on them," Hussan Al-Mazeedi, a 33-year-old public relations official, said as he stood in a lengthy bread line with his young son. "They had months to prepare for this [liberation] and now nothing is being done."

Kuwait's government faces a Herculean task. Iraqi soldiers did their best to destroy the country's modern, sophisticated infrastructure — from oil wells to electricity plants to the telephone system.

Iraqi envoy seeks asylum: Iraq's Ambassador in Madrid has applied for political asylum in Spain and gone into hiding, the ABC newspaper reported Tuesday, says Reuter.

Arshad Tawfiq made the request last weekend, the newspaper said, citing unidentified sources. The Spanish government was protecting Tawfiq against possible attacks from Iraqi groups loyal to President Saddam Hussein it said.

Officials at the Foreign Ministry and at the Iraqi Embassy could not be reached immediately for comment. Tawfiq had been a vocal exponent of Baghdad's stand after Iraq invades Kuwait on August 2 and harshly criticised Spain for joining the US led coalition that forced Iraq's army out of the emirate last month.

No stake in politics: Schwarzkopf: Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, who was overall commander of Operation Desert Storm, said he has no political aspirations, reports Reuter.

I have never considered any political aspirations (and) at the present time I am certainly not thinking about anything of that nature, the General said on NBC's Tuesday show.

Schwarzkopf in the interview taped Sunday in Saudi Arabia, said the turmoil in Iraq did not surprise him due to the Iraqis' long term dissatisfaction with the leadership of President Saddam Hussein.

Confce on Asian refugees: Australia, Britain and Canada have called an international conference in Geneva this Canada discuss the plight of Asia's thousands of Vietnamese refugees, the foreign office said on Monday, reports Reuter.

A foreign office spokesman said the meeting would take place on March 25 and 26 in Geneva.

Senior officials from 11 other nations have been invited to discuss setting up a steering committee to help solve issues relating to the Vietnamese boat-people.

"The UK policy has not changed. Those who are not refugees can have no hope of settlement and will return to Vietnam," the spokesman said.

Israeli troops kill 6 Arabs: Israeli troops shot dead six Arab gunmen attempting across-border raid from Jordan Monday, hours before US Secretary of State James Baker was due in Israel, Israel radio said, reports Reuter.

Three Israeli soldiers were wounded in the dawn clash east of Tirat Zvi farming collective in the Jordan valley, the radio said.

Security forces are on alert for possible attacks by Palestinian Nationalist during Baker's low-day visit to discuss Middle East peace prospects with Israeli leaders.

Malaysians win Quran Contest: Malaysia won in both the men's and women's sections of the 32nd annual International Quran Reading Competition Monday night, reports AP.

Mohamad Yusuf was judged winner of the men's section. He had 86.8 points. Brunei's Awang Mohamed Yusof Abu Bakar was second with 85 points, and Indonesia's Muarrif Abbas third with 84.8. In the men's section, the National News Agency Bernama reported.

In the women's section, Faridah Mat Saman obtained 89.5 points to retain the title. Thailand's Fatimah Madyean was second with 86 points while Indonesia's Siti Marlina Muarrif came in third with 85.3 points.