Loyalists shell Karbala, Najaf : Hussein's shrine damaged

Rebels seek world help to stop genocide in Iraq

LONDON, Mar 15 : Iraqi opposition leaders appealed to the world Thursday to save them from a new genocide by supporting their anti-government uprising, reports AP.

At a special all-party meeting in the House of Commons, they also appealed for food and medicine to be sent to rebel-controlled areas of Iraq and said government forces are preventing supplies to reach these areas.

"The people of Iraq appeal for international support for the establishment of a democratic Iraq and to prevent a new genocide by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein," said Barham Salih, the London representative of the Iraqi Kurdistan Front.

Salih's appeal was echoed by Muhamed Ali, the London representative of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

The Kurds and the Muslim Shi'ite community of Iraq, represented by the Supreme Council, have joined forces in the spontaneous uprising of opposition forces in Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein after his disastrous defeat by the allied coalition in the Gulf War.

The meeting marked the third anniversary of the killing of more than 5,000 Kurdish civilians when Iraqi planes bombed the Kurdish town of Halabja with chemical weapons on March 16, 1988 during an earlier Kurdish uprising.

The Kurdish rebels claim they have liberated a large area of Iraqi Kurdistan in their 2-week-old uprising, including the major towns of Erbil and Sulaymaniya, and that they are besieging the major oil-producing center of Kirkuk.

APP from Trois-Ilets Martinique adds : US President George Bush Thursday said US forces occupying southern Iraq would not leave until a formal ceasefire was signed, and that such an accord was being delayed by Iraq's use of helicopters to put down an anti-government revolt.

French President Francois Mitterrand, for his part, said the job of French forces in the region was done.

The two men, who met here for two-and-a-half hours and then held a joint press conference agreed however that it was not up to the allies to dictate what Iraq must do in the aftermath of the Gulf war. Bush said he did not want to see a repetition of US experience in Korea with the deployment of a permanent US presence in Iraq.

Reuter from Nicosia adds : Iraqi rebels fighting to oust President Saddam Hussein reported Thursday that shellfire from his crack troops had damaged Shi'ite Muslim shrines in the holy city of Karbala.

It was the latest action reported in a rebellion that broke out two weeks ago in the Shi'ite south of Iraq and the Kurdish north after US-led forces drove Saddam's army from Kuwait.

The Tehran-based Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq said long-range artillery fire on Karbala by Saddam's Republican Guard damaged the golden domes of the shrines of Hussein, the Prophet Mohammed's grandson and the third Shi'ite Imam, and his brother Abbas.

The Republican Guard had also shelled Najaf, another Shi'ite holy city south of Baghdad, said the report, carried by the Iranian news agency IRNA.

There was no way of verifying this or other rebel claims. All foreign journalists were expelled from Iraq.

Rebel groups say they control dozens of cities and towns and have vowed to fight on until Saddam is overthrown.

*** 4,000 prisoners freed in Kirkuk**
*** Rebels seize missile base**

The United States said Thursday the struggle in the south was seesawing between government forces and the rebels while heavy fighting continued in the north.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said he could not confirm reports that rebels controlled large areas of the Kurdish region.

"What I can tell you is that the information available to us shows continued heavy fighting in and around several cities and towns in the Kurdish north since Thursday," Boucher said.

"The situation in the south continues to seesaw as we receive reports of renewed fighting in towns where the government had previously appeared to have suppressed the earlier unrest," he said.

Iraq admitted for the first time this week that it faced a series of uprisings against Saddam.

But the Iraqi news agency IRA said reports Wednesday of clashes between Iraqi troops and demonstrators in the capital, Baghdad, were "fabricated, baseless and completely unfounded."

In the far north, close to the Turkish border, rebels were engaged in artillery clashes with government forces near the town of Zakho, which commands the main road and pipeline to Turkey, Turkey's semi-official Anatolia news agency said.

It quoted witnesses in the Turkish border town of Silopi as saying shells were heard exploding near Zakho, 15 km (nine miles) south of the frontier, and smoke and dust billowed on mountain slopes just inside Iraq.

IRNA quoted a spokesman for the rebel Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) as saying Iraqi troops had killed an unspecified number of people in the northern oil centre of Kirkuk, forcing residents of government-held areas out of the city.

In Paris, a spokesman for the Kurdish Socialist Party said rebels had freed 4,000 prisoners from the main jail in Kirkuk which rebels seized on Wednesday.

He said a big battle was under way in Kirkuk and Iraqi troops had set two oilwells on fire outside the city.

IRNA quoted a PUK spokesman as saying rebel forces had seized control of 10 more cities in the northern province of Dahuk, including the provincial capital.

"With the liberation of the 10 cities including Dahuk, 90 per cent of the Kurdish populated province has come under control of popular forces," the agency quoted spokesman Bekker Fattah as saying.

South of Baghdad, rebels said they had seized control of Hilla, main city of Babylon province, and seven nearby towns and had executed the Governor and other senior officials.

They said many of Saddam's formidable Republican Guards were defecting to join their forces.

Iraqi opposition radio in Basra, Iraq's second city and a centre of the two-week revolt, said rebels repulsed a Republican Guard attack, destroying 20 tanks and armoured vehicles.

"Voice of revolutionary Iraq" said 16 senior officers from the 10th armoured brigade of the Republican Guard, which launched the attack to the north of Quarna, 70 km (40 miles) north of Basra, joined the rebels.

Off the Record

Glaspie to unveil her talks with Saddam

WASHINGTON : After a lengthy silence, Ambassador April Glaspie is expected to rebut allegations that she unwittingly signalled Saddam Hussein last summer that the United States would not contest an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, reports AP.

US officials said Glaspie views an Iraqi transcript of her July 25 conversation with Saddam as "selective and incomplete." According to the transcript, Glaspie, who was then ambassador to Iraq, told Saddam that the United States had "no opinion on inter-Arab disputes, such as your border disagreement with Kuwait."

Seizing on that comment, Sen. Patrick Leahy said Glaspie, on instructions from the State Department, "virtually gave a green light to Saddam Hussein" for the invasion.

A week after she spoke to Saddam, Glaspie flew to London, not believing that Saddam would do what he did the next day : invade Kuwait. Shortly thereafter, the Iraqis released their account of Saddam's conversation with Glaspie.

The US officials, asking not to be identified, said Glaspie plans to break her silence in the coming days. They said she will disclose that she warned Saddam on July 25 that the United States strongly opposed the use of force as a means of resolving conflicts.

It is not known what forum she will use to give her side of the story.

Glaspie, 48, has not spoken publicly about the events leading up to the invasion of Kuwait. Some Democrats have suggested that a firmer stand by Glaspie in her conversation with Saddam might have averted a full-blown crisis in the Gulf.

Secretary of State James A. Baker III has said it is "ludicrous to suggest that somehow Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait because we led him to invade Kuwait."

Glaspie, a specialist in Arab affairs, is one of a handful of women in the diplomatic service who have won ambassadorial appointments.

Maneka's love for circus animals

NEW DELHI : India has banned circuses from training or exhibiting tigers, monkeys, bears, panthers and dogs with immediate effect, the Press Trust of India news agency said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

India's Minister of Environment, Maneka Gandhi, sent out the order to state governments at the beginning of this month, the news agency said.

Gandhi, the estranged sister-in-law of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is a fierce animal rights advocate who has a hospital for wounded strays on her Delhi farm.

Last year, she ordered authorities to confiscate a dancing sloth-bear and to take it to the Delhi zoo to try to enforce a wild life protection law.

His owner, one of a dwindling band of street artists who entertain with animal tricks, has filed suit against Gandhi in the Supreme Court demanding the return of his bear.

It was not clear if Gandhi's latest order included bear and monkey shows that are a common feature in many Indian towns.

Calcutta can't be a stage : Jyoti

CALCUTTA : The Chief Minister, Mr Jyoti Basu, on Thursday denied that he had any difference of opinion with the state's Information and Cultural Minister, Mr Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, on the filming of Dominique Lapierre's "City of Joy" in the metropolis, reports PTI.

"We do not like the film and the script, but we are not thinking of banning the film or its shooting," Mr Basu told newsmen here.

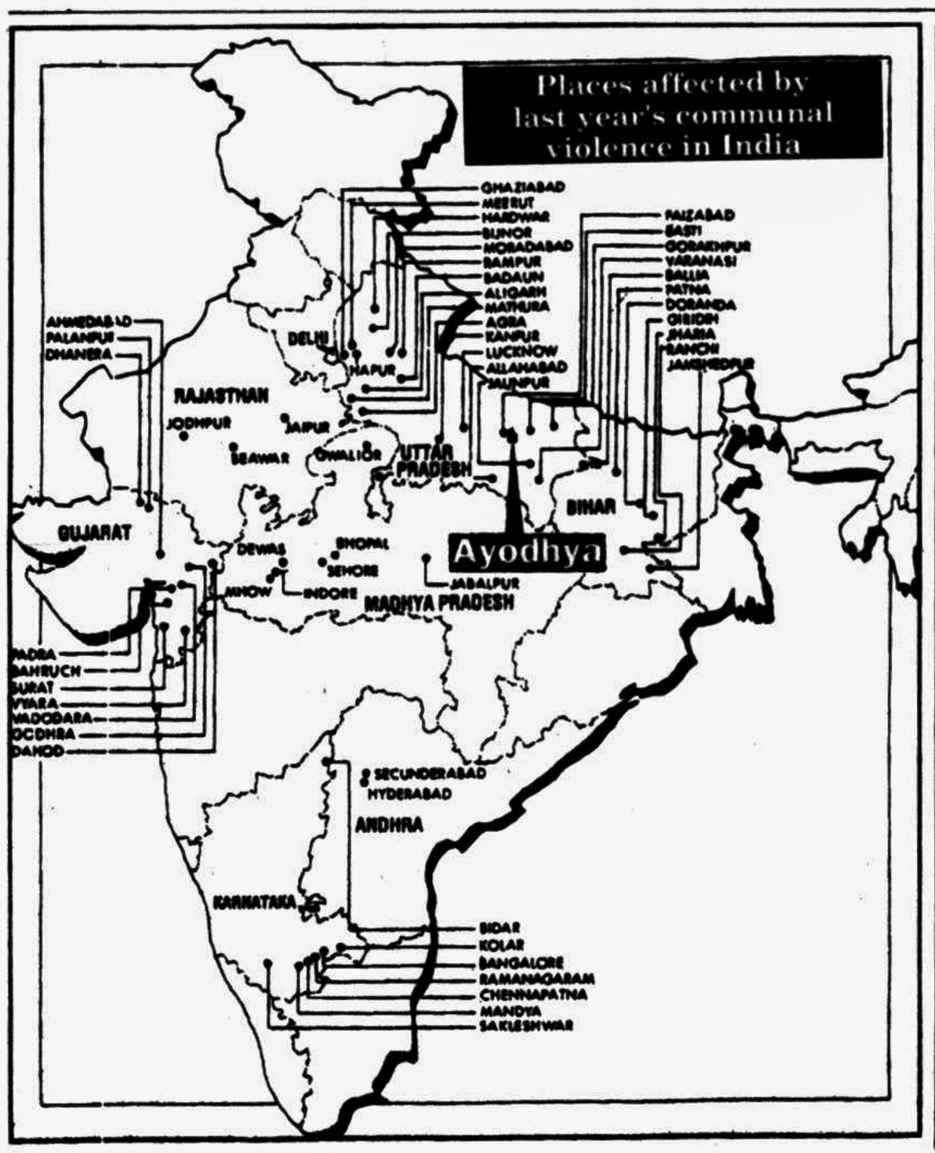
Mr Basu said that he had already expressed his objection to the film as well as the script to the author of the film who met him here recently.

"Calcutta can not be turned into a stage. Can you imagine, Oxford street in London is closed for shooting purpose? "

However, Mr Basu said he believed in cultural freedom, although "we will continue to register our protest against the film."

The Chief Minister said that shooting of the film was approved by the Information Minister in the V.P Singh government with modification to the scripts but he added, the modified scripts did not reach the West Bengal government.

The Front government had collected views from some important personalities in the city about the film, which would be sent to the Centre soon, Mr Basu added.



Kuwait to slash foreign population

KUWAIT, Mar 15 : Kuwait plans to slash its post-war population by half to about one million to ensure Kuwaiti nationals form a majority, Western diplomats said Thursday, reports Reuter.

Hundreds of thousands of foreign workers who fled often-lowly jobs in the wealthy Gulf Emirate after Iraq's invasion last August 2 will not be allowed back.

The diplomats, who quoted government sources, said the number of Kuwaitis permanently resident at home would stabilise at about 550,000.

Palestinians would form the second largest community with about 200,000. The balance would be made up of migrant workers From Egypt, the South Asia subcontinent and Asia together with Secral thousand European and US managers and oil specialists.

One diplomat said the current skeleton population was no more than half a million compared with 1.7 million before the Gulf war. Most were in Kuwait City and a majority were Kuwaiti nationals, he added.

The authorities are determined to prevent a recurrence of the population mix before the Iraqi occupation when Kuwaitis were a minority of between 30 and 40 per cent in their own country.

Planning Minister Salman Abdul-Razek al-Mutwawa said after Kuwait was liberated two weeks ago, "there can be no going back to the Kuwait of August 1 — fat and flabby and relying on the state."

BRIEFLY

Serbian govt threatened : The opposition in Serbia ended five days of anti-communist protests Thursday but threatened to go back onto the streets if the government in Yugoslavia's biggest republic did not resign, reports Reuter.

Students called off their peaceful vigil in central Belgrade claiming victory after winning concessions from Serbia's communist rulers. But opposition leader Vuk Draskovic told a news conference the opposition would officially demand the entire government's resignation in the republic's Parliament. If that is not achieved we will go on the streets again, peacefully, Draskovic said.

25 killed in Ecuador : Twenty-five passengers were killed and injured when a bus plunged into a precipice because heavy rains had eroded the highway, police reported Thursday, says AP.

The accident occurred Wednesday night near Baeza, 45 miles (80 kilometres) east of Quito, the police report said. The bus was travelling from the capital to Lago Agrio in the Amazon region, 112 miles (180 kilometres) northeast of Quito.

Heavy rains in the region softened the ground under the highway, police said.

Six die In Brazilian jail : Six prisoners burned to death and more than 20 were injured after they set a fire in the main jail of the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre Thursday,,a government official said, reports Reuter.

"They set fire to the mattresses and died of burns," said Luiz Guimaraes, a spokesman for the Justice Secretariat. The blaze was later brought under control.

The jail was built to hold 600 prisoners but contained 1,500. Revolts are common in Brazil's overcrowded jails.

Referendum on Slovak freedom : Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel Thursday proposed a referendum on Slovak independence in a bid to defuse a dispute between the country's Czech and Slovak communities, reports AFP.

Havel said necessary changes enabling the holding of a referendum could be voted by the Federal Parliament. Czechoslovakia's Constitution, drawn up during the period of communist rule does not at present provide for a referendum.

The Czechoslovak President said Slovaks should make their choice in a referendum which was, he said, "the only truly democratic way to decide on such an important issue."

Iraq loses war : Castro : Iraq lost the Gulf war because it's people were unprepared and did not fight to the death, Cuban President Fidel Castro was quoted as saying Thursday, reports AP.

With the end of the Gulf war, US-Cuba tensions are resurfacing, Castro said in a speech to university students Wednesday that was carried a day later by the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina. The report was monitored in Mexico City.

Cuba would never start a war but if one occurs, "it will win whatever the cost" because it has been preparing for war for many years, Castro said.

"Wars should never be started but once they are unleashed they have to be done well and cannot end without victory or death," Castro said. "There was a great army but there wasn't a doctrine of war by all the people."

No reprisal in Kuwait : US : The United States said Thursday it had found no evidence that the Kuwaiti government was torturing or killing Palestinians, reports AFP.

There have been widespread reports of alleged maltreatment of Palestinian residents in the Emirate where many have been accused of collaborating with the Iraqi authorities during Iraq's seven month occupation of Kuwait.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher confirmed Thursday that the US government had been investigating these reports. But he added, "so far, our extensive inquiries amongst the Palestinian community in Kuwait have failed to substantiate reports of torture or killings of Palestinians by the Kuwait authorities."

Muslims asked to vacate thousands of mosques

VHP whipping up Hindu passions in Indian polls

NEW DELHI, Mar 15: Hindu militants are stepping up their campaign to take over three ancient shrines also claimed by Muslims in what is seen as a deliberate prelude to upcoming Indian general elections, reports AFP.

Hindu organisations have called a religious Parliament here next month followed by a mass rally expected to draw more than two million faithful, in support of demands that Muslims surrender the religious sites.

A Hindu leader said adherents of India's largest religion were determined to have their way.

"Come what may, we are not going to give up our rights on the temples," said Baikunth Lal Sharma, who heads the New Delhi chapter of the powerful Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council).

"We are determined," he said. "We want only those who speak for Hindus to govern this great Hindu land."

Critics see the VHP's threatening posture as part of a strategy to whip up Hindu passions ahead of national elections, expected in May following the dissolution of Federal Parliament Wednesday.

Hindus constitute an overwhelming, 80 per cent of secular India's 850 million population. Muslims number more than 100 million and form the country's largest religious minority.

The VHP is spearheading a campaign to take over a crumbling 16th-century mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya, built during India's early Islamic era.

Hindu militants say the Moghul King Babar built the mosque on the site after demolishing a temple of Hindu Lord Rama, reputed to have been born there . Muslims and some historians dispute this account.

The Ayodhya controversy has left hundreds dead in bloody Hindu-Muslim violence across India over the last two years. The VHP lays similar claims on two other shrines in the Hindu holy towns of Varanasi and Mathura.

Hundreds of VHP supporters twice tried to storm and demolish the Ayodhya shrine last year in attempts thwarted by security forces, who opened fire killing a total of 24 people by official count.

On Tuesday, Purshottam Narain Singh, a senior VHP leader, asked Muslims to give up by April 4 claims on the three religious places of Ayodhya, Mathura and Varanasi, all in Uttar Pradesh state.

"We will like to impress upon our Muslim brothers that they should gracefully hand over the sites in the interest of communal and national harmony," he told reporters in Ayodhya.

Mr. Singh warned that if the Muslims refused to heed the request, Hindus would launch massive campaigns to "reclaim thousands of shrines which were temples but have been made mosques."

The deadline of April 4 coincides with the mass rally called by the VHP in New Delhi immediately after a two-day religious congregation expected to be attended by some 10,000 Hindu clerics and ascetics.

I sacrificed my government to save the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya
—V P Singh

"Our aim is to put pressure on the government," said Sharma, urging Hindus to hoist saffron VHP flags on their houses March 17 and prepare a list of "illegal mosques" by March 30.

The statements drew angry reactions from Muslim leaders and major political parties who charged the VHP with trying to help the Hindu-revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) in the coming elections.

The BJP, one of India's best-organised political parties, has increasingly identified itself with the Hindu cause and won 86 seats in Parliament in the November 1989 polls in its best performance ever.

The BJP toppled Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh over the Ayodhya controversy by cutting off its legislative support for his minority government to protest his opposition to its Ayodhya crusade.

New govt replacing Crown Prince in Kuwait sought

NICOSIA, Mar 15 : Kuwait's official news agency KUNA, in a move hinting at a new approach to democracy in the Emirate, Thursday reported a call for a new government to replace the one led by the Crown Prince, reports Reuter.

Former Member of Parliament Mubarakal-Dweila, in a London statement quoted by KUNA, said there was a need "to form a popular government which can meet the future expectations of the Kuwaiti people, particularly the return of the 1962 Constitution by holding general elections for a new parliament."

He said holding elections should be given top priority. The KUNA report, which coincided with the return of the Emir, appeared to herald a new approach by Kuwait's state-owned media to the issue of democracy.

Like the rest of Kuwait's media, KUNA has been subject to censorship since 1986 when the Emir, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, dissolved a freely-elected Parliament.

Their coverage of the pro-democracy movement, which sprang onto Kuwait's political scene in December 1989 with calls for a return of the dissolved assembly, was confined to official announcements — mostly sketchy and lacking substance.

Articles in Kuwait's privately-owned newspapers either poured scorn on the movement, cast doubt on its motives or just ignored it.

Dweila, in the statement quoted by KUNA, applauded a decision by the pro-democracy movement to postpone a meeting due in London on Thursday to press demands for reforms in Kuwait.

Ali al-Bidah, head of the meeting's organising committee, said Wednesday that they wanted to give Kuwaitis who stayed in the country during Iraq's occupation a chance to attend. It is now due to be held around mid-April.

Bhattarai to banish poverty in 15 years

KATHMANDU, Mar 15 : Nepali Congress President Krishna Prasad Bhattarai issued Thursday an election manifesto pledging to banish poverty from the country within 15 years, reports AFP.

The 40-page manifesto, released at a press conference, said the Nepali Congress would enhance the powers and prestige of the House of Representatives, set up an independent judiciary, and safeguard the freedom of the press.

The Nepali Congress would take stern action against former leaders under the ousted partyless Panchayat system who accumulated wealth through corruption, the manifesto said.