

Gaddafi abolishes border with Egypt

NICOSIA, Mar 29 : Libya leader Moamer Gaddafi on Thursday unilaterally announced the abolition of the border and customs controls between his country and Egypt, the Libyan new agency Jana reported, says AFP.

Colonel Gaddafi, driving a tractor, symbolically smashed the border post at Tobruk in north-east Libya, the agency said.

There was no official reaction to the move late Thursday. Egypt's official Middle East news agency reported Col. Gaddafi's statement without comment.

A Jana said: "On the 21st anniversary of the evacuation of English forces and bases from Libya, the unionist Colonel Moamer Gaddafi has destroyed the artificial gateway erected by the colonialists between the sons of a single people in Egypt and Libya."

Shi'ite scholar confined in Kufa : US troops bury 440 Iraqis

NICOSIA, Mar 29 : The Muslim world's most senior Shi'ite scholar, 95-year-old grand Ayatollah Abolqassem Al-Khoei, is kept under house arrest in Iraq away from aides and relatives, his son told Iran's IRNA news agency, reports Reuter.

"My father is now in Kufa, near the holy city of Najaf, closely guarded by Baathist Security Forces," IRNA on Thursday quoted Saheb Khoei as saying.

The ailing grand Ayatollah, who appeared on Iraqi television last week with President Saddam Hussein, "is all alone

with none of his kin or associates near him," his son added.

IRNA said reports from Iraq indicated relatives of Khoei, including women and children, as well as several prominent clerics from Najaf, were in jail in Baghdad.

Shi'ite Iran, which has rejected Baghdad's charges of helping the rebellion, strongly protested to Baghdad over its treatment of Khoei. It said

Iraqi agents had transferred him to Baghdad and forced him to appear on television.

Khoei suffered from heart and kidney problems, IRNA said.

AFP from Riyadh adds : US forces have buried a total of 444 Iraqi soldiers at 55 sites since the war began to drive Iraq from Kuwait, the US central command said in Riyadh Thursday in a statement.

Command spokesman US navy Lieutenant Commander said however that he could not

give a figure for war dead and refused to comment on reports that 100,000 Iraqis may have been killed in both the air and ground phases of the war from January 17-February 28.

The statement said the policy had been for Iraqi dead in accordance with Muslim tradition and custom. Saudi Arabia was a member of the US-led coalition which won the war.

The US statement did not give a figure for how many

Iraqis the Saudis had interned but said they had "five major burial sites."

Even such a figure, however, "will not provide a total accounting of Iraqi dead," the statement said.

This was because there may still be some remains "in locations throughout the Kuwaiti theater of operations (KTO)" where various coalition units buried Iraqis for sanitation reasons.

In addition, "it is likely that with the speed of the armoured main attack which often took place at night, some defensive positions were bypassed which may contain Iraqi dead," the statement said.

"Additionally, evidence from enemy prisoners of war indicates that during the air campaign, the Iraqis themselves each morning buried their comrades who were killed the night before."

"Also, during the course of the war, the Kuwaiti civilians buried Iraqis for reasons of sanitation," the statement said.

Another report says : Baghdad claimed Thursday that its troops had retaken the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk from Kurdish rebels in an attack reportedly involving tanks, helicopter gunships and heavy artillery.

Iraqi television showed film of a senior official talking to people in Kirkuk, the Iraqi News Agency INA said in a dispatch monitored in Cyprus.



DUHOK (northern Iraq) : A Kurdish mother watches over her badly injured little daughter in the local hospital of this Kurdish village. The girl was hit during clashes between rebels and Iraqi forces by artillery. —APP/UNB photo

US truce plan fails to impress UN members

NEW YORK (United Nations), Mar 29 : The United States failed in its bid to convince other Security Council members to formalise the ceasefire with Iraq before the end of the week, reports AFP.

Late Thursday, Council members decided to continue talks on Monday concerning the ceasefire resolution, which is now not expected to be formally adopted until the end of next week.

Following a week of debate, the Council five permanent members from the United States, Britain, China, France and the Soviet Union finally agreed on a draft resolution which they presented to the full Council on Thursday.

The draft calls for a ceasefire once Iraq accepts the 1963 Iraq-Kuwait border and agrees to dismantle its weapons of mass destruction and contribute to a fund for war reparations.

The US-sponsored resolution all for UN military observers to be stationed in a border zone to assure compliance and the Security Council would be empowered to take "all necessary measures" for violations.

Reuters from Washington adds : The United States is exploring the idea of a regional

peace conference on the Middle East, first raised by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, and some Arab states believe the concept has merit, a US official said on Thursday.

"The regional conference idea was raised by Israel and some of the Arab countries seem to be taken with the idea," the official told Reuter on condition of anonymity.

"There seemed to be some merit in exploring the idea," he added.

US government spokesmen officially left open the possibility of a conference. But they stuck with Secretary of State James Baker's refusal to publicly divulge details during this sensitive period of trying to get a new peace initiative started between Arabs and Israelis.

There are a number of ideas floating out there on how to get the peace process going again. No decisions have been made, White House spokesman Roman Popadiuk said, "Everything is still in a very rudimentary discussion phase."

The New York Times reported on Thursday the United States and the Soviet Union might act as hosts of regional peace talks US officials said that would depend on Moscow establishing formal diplomatic ties with the Jewish state.

BRIEFLY

**Prisoners escape in Mali :** All the Common Law prisoners held in Bamako's central prison escaped on Tuesday, following the overthrow Monday of President Moussa Traore, Mali's official radio and television in Bamako reported Wednesday, reports AFP.

It said the escape followed a mutiny by the 1,468 prisoners on Monday morning.

**2 Palestinians shot dead :** Israeli soldiers shot dead two Palestinians and wounded more than 40 during clashes in the occupied Gaza strip town, Palestinians and foreign relief workers in Rafah said Thursday, reports Reuter.

Residents of Rafah, a town and refugee camp of 100,000, identified the dead as Sami Abdel-Al, 22, killed on Wednesday night, and said Abu Mur, 15, shot in the head.

**19 Taipei pilgrims die :** At least 19 people on a pilgrimage from Taiwan to China's southeastern Fujian province died when a tour bus plunged into a river, a travel agent in Taipei said on Thursday, reports AFP.

The dead were among 56 residents from Taiwan's southern Taiwan and Kaohsiung countries on a trip to worship Matsuo, the sea goddess, in her legendary home of Meizhou country, said Chang Lung-Pao, Manager of the firm which arranged the tour.

**Soviet pullout from Prague ends :** The last 12 Soviet tanks in Czechoslovakia were withdrawn from the country Wednesday, reports Xinhua.

As a result, the Soviet Union has completed the pullout of its 1,220 tanks in Czechoslovakia.

CTK news agency in Prague reported that there remain in this country 9,358 soldiers, 82 combat vehicles 30 cannons and mortars, 2,692 transport vehicles and seven helicopters of the Soviet armed forces.

**Consensus on Iraqi POWs :** Iraqi and Allied military commanders agreed on Thursday to speed up the repatriation of Iraqi prisoners of war, the US military in Riyadh said, reports Reuter.

Meeting in the Saudi capital, the two sides decided to raise the number of Iraqi soldiers being taken home by bus from Allied prison camps in Saudi Arabia to 5,000 a day from next Tuesday from 1,000 at present, the US central command said in a statement.

About 5,000 Iraqi prisoners have been released since the Gulf war ended late last month.

**Bid to hijack Aeroflot plane foiled :** An attempt to hijack an Aeroflot internal flight to Sweden was foiled Thursday by crew members who neutralised the hijacker, Tass news agency reported, reports AFP from Moscow.

Alexei Kuznetsov, 18 tried to seize the Tupolev-134 plane, which was carrying 80 passengers from Arkhangelsk in the far north to Kaliningrad on the Baltic sea. He turned out to be unarmed.

**Governor wants polls in Kashmir :** The top official in Kashmir has recommended holding Parliamentary elections in the state, where Muslim rebels are waging a bloody insurrection, officials in Srinagar said on Thursday, reports AP.

Governor Girish Chandra Saxena sent his recommendation to Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar Wednesday, saying elections should be held in all six constituencies of the state of Jammu-Kashmir, said the officials.

The recommendation reflected a growing confidence that security forces were regaining control in the state, where armed guerrillas have killed more than 2,020 people since last winter to press demands for independence.

Former Iraqi minister confirms swindling US aware of 50 companies, 100 agents handling Saddam's money

WASHINGTON, Mar 28 : ABC news reported on Wednesday the US Treasury was awaiting White House approval to name some 50 companies and 100 agents who acted as fronts for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in his far-flung financial deals, reports Reuter.

The television network said the disclosure could come as early as Monday and would lead to the freezing of the companies' and agents' assets, block their accounts and help in establishing war reparations for Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The report alleged that Saddam had skimmed off a percentage of Iraq's 200 billion dollars in oil revenues over more than a decade. The Financial Times newspaper and CBS news have made similar claims.

ABC interviewed former Iraqi Planning Minister Jawad Hashim, in exile in London, who said Saddam kept some four billion dollars in cash on hand at his presidential palace and overall had skimmed off over 30 billion dollars.

The funds came from a percentage on oil deals, bribes from arms salesmen and kickbacks from Japanese companies for contracts, according to Hashim.

Saddam used the money to buy weapons secretly, pay for



favours from foreign leaders and for private expenses, Hashim said. He described foreign leaders visiting Baghdad leaving with briefcases filled with one million dollars. He recalled that in July, 1989, Saddam's wife paid 320 million dollars for the jewellery collection of the wife of the late Shah of Iran. Hashim said a colleague learned of the purchase price after a bid of 280 million dollars had been rejected. AFP from London adds :

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has siphoned off billions of dollars from Iraqi oil receipts for his own use and invested the money in secret overseas accounts with a total value now of around 19 billion pounds, a former Iraqi minister has told the Times newspaper.

In an interview carried by the daily today, former Planning Minister Jawad Hashim said that Hussein had taken some five per cent of his country's oil receipts, with an original value of 5.7 billion dollars.

The paper also reported that according to official Iraqi statistics an additional sum of around 60 billion dollars had gone missing from the treasury between 1968 and 1989.

Hashim, a colleague of the Iraqi President for 11 years, said the money was used to buy personal property and to provide resources abroad that could be used for a comeback in case Hussein and his regime were ever ousted from power.

He added that President Saddam had told him that if he were to be forced out he would make certain nothing would be left behind to help a subsequent regime stay in power.

"If I leave, then we will ensure that whoever takes over will find no more than rubble," the Iraqi leader was quoted as saying.

Sabah family members involved in reprisal killings

KUWAIT CITY, Mar 29 : Some members of Kuwait's ruling family were involved in the killings of Palestinians and other people suspected of collaborating with the Iraqis.

"He gave them a stern lecture, even going so far as to threaten to hang them from the streetlights for everybody to see," the diplomat said.

Since then, the diplomat said his staff and other Western embassies believe the goon squads have disappeared from Kuwait's streets.

For the first three weeks after Kuwait was liberated Feb. 27, members of the al-Sabah family could be seen patrolling the streets, harassing civilians.

"They tended to have an entourage, more than one vehicle with distinctly military marking, often an armoured personnel carrier, the diplomat said.

There have been allegations by opposition activists that members of the royal family had formed private "death squads" to execute people suspected of collaborating with the Iraqis.

Abdullah al-Hebari, a former

member of parliament and head of the newly formed Kuwait Democratic Forum, has claimed that one group, the leader of which he declined to identify, had already executed 15 people.

Al-Hebert blamed the gangs in the shooting of opposition activist Hamad al-Ju'an on Feb. 28. Al-Ju'an is still hospitalized.

At the time, Ahmed al-Sabah, a member of the royal family who operated a militia during Iraq's occupation, called al-Hebari's charges "outrageous."

"We fought for the resistance, my father died for the resistance and these intellectuals go and make these kind of comments," he said.

His father, Sheik Fahd al-Ahmed al-Sabah was gunned down by Iraqi troops and is widely hailed as a hero.

Last week, Middle East Watch, New York-based human rights organization, said Kuwaiti security forces and free-lance gangs were torturing hundreds of people

Mujahideen down plane

ISLAMABAD, Mar 29 : Mujahideen fighting the Soviet-backed Afghan government said on Thursday they had shot down a transport plane over the besieged eastern town of Khost, reports Reuter.

The plane, carrying supplies from the capital Kabul, was hit on Wednesday night while trying to land at the new airport of the garrison town, the Pakistan-based Afghan Mujahideen government's media news service said.

It said the plane's pilot and a number of crew members were killed. There was no independent confirmation of the report.

Khost, 25 km (15 miles) from the Pakistan border, had been under attack by Mujahideen for 11 days but western diplomats and Mujahideen sources said intense aerial bombing by the government appeared to have stalled the offensive.

Media said the Mujahideen were continuing to attack Khost while "holding consultations for designing their future strategy." Kabul radio said government forces killed a Mujahideen Commander, Ali Ahmed, and 17 others in the Khost area on Thursday.

Off the Record

Reagon meets her at long last

WASHINGTON : For 10 years, former US President Ronald Reagon had been looking for a nurse who lifted his spirits by holding his hand after he was shot. On Thursday, he got to hug her, reports Reuter.

Denise Sullivan came out to meet Reagon at a ceremony at George Washington University marking the 10th anniversary of Reagon's shooting and treatment at the university hospital.

In his autobiography, Reagon wrote about how he had been cheered up by a nurse who held his hand in the hospital recovery room after his emergency treatment on March 30, 1981.

Unable to talk, he wrote her a note : "Does Nancy (his wife) know about us? But she left before he learned her name."

Reagon asked the university President, Stephen Trachtenberg, to find out who the nurse was and Trachtenberg brought Sullivan on stage to greet Reagon, who hugged her.



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Leave us alone: Kasparov

BEVERLY HILLS (California) : World chess champion Garry Kasparov has a bit of advice for Americans who want to see a more democratic Soviet Union : "Leave us alone," reports AP.

Kasparov, 27, a vocal opponent of Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, said he is convinced that Communism will die by itself in his homeland, without outside help.

"If you leave us alone, within a year, there will be no Gorbachev, there will be no Communists. There will be something else. It will happen," he said Monday.

Kasparov is in the Los Angeles area developing a series of chess videotapes and software.

Kasparov said his defeats of former world chess champ Anatoly Karpov mirrored the struggle between the old order and the new at home.

"Chess is black and white," he said. "Karpov, Kasparov, pro and anti. I didn't have my anti-Communist ideas at that time. That came later. All our matches were a step ahead of the changes in the country."

Bush, Schwarzkopf on same wavelength

WASHINGTON : President George Bush telephoned General Norman Schwarzkopf Thursday to express full confidence in him despite a flap over the General's assertion that he had recommended continuing the ground offensive against Iraq, reports AFP.

"There is no ill will on this issue," said White House spokesman Roman Padtuk said of Mr. Bush. "He supports him 100 per cent."

The spokesman said Mr. Bush was convinced he and the General were "on the same wavelength." He said the General was "very pleased and appreciative" of the call.

Wednesday the Pentagon and the White House rushed to deny a statement by Gen. Schwarzkopf in a televised interview that he had recommended that the Allies should "continue the march" and destroy the fleeing Iraqi army. The General, however, praised Mr. Bush for his "courageous" decision to end the fighting after 100 hours.

But both Mr. Bush and Defence Secretary Dick Cheney said the General had raised no objection to the decision to halt the fighting and was in agreement with it.

Khun Sa's mules carry bumper opium harvest

PANGSUE (Burma), March 29 : The thousands of mules of drug warlord Khun Sa are being rested and fattened in the rich pastureland beyond the mountains of Pangsue in eastern Burma, reports Reuter.

They are gaining strength to carry a bumper opium harvest to clandestine laboratories which will convert it into heroin to satisfy the cravings of drug addicts the world over.

The 6,000 residents of this muddy capital of drug warlord Khun Sa's fiefdom in Shan state celebrated recently with games, folk dances, rock bands at night and soccer matches during the day.

They spoke of hundreds of relatives, soldiers of General Khun Sa's Muang Tai Army, who could not join the festivities because they were tending mules beyond the mountains.

"The mules are allowed three months rest after the rainy season and they are being fed to regain their strength. When they are strong enough, the mules will resume their hard work after the Chinese New Year," a villager told Reuter.

During the rainy season, when four-wheel-drive vehicles cannot get through, caravans of hundreds of mules are used to bring supplies from Thailand to the army and civilian population of Khun Sa's rebel Burmese state.

After the dry-season harvest the mules move the state's main product, opium, out of the inaccessible mountains to heroin factories spread throughout the "Golden Triangle," where Burma, Laos and Thailand meet.

In 1991, their burden is expected to be a heavy one. All the hills are covered with poppies this year," a soldier said. He had just returned for the festival from the opium fields.

"This year is the biggest I have ever seen and I have been with godfather Khun Sa for more than 12 years," he said.

Another returning soldier said the poppy plants, which yield the opium from which heroin is made, are already two feet (more than half a metre) high and look ready to produce a bumper crop by February.

Thai officials said nearly 300,000 acres (125,000 hectares) of Shan state have been turned over to poppy cultivation this year.

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Soviet FM in Tokyo to extend olive branch

TOKYO, Mar 29 : Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh arrived in Tokyo on Friday to make final preparations for President Mikhail Gorbachev's visit next month, the first by a Kremlin leader, reports Reuter.

"I am sure that (Gorbachev's) visit here will be fruitful," he said in an airport statement. "Soviet-Japan relations are also important for Asia and the rest of the world."

Bessmertnykh was to hold two rounds of talks here with counterpart Taro Nakayama

Hurd to visit China to talk HK's future

LONDON, Mar 29 : British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd said yesterday the main purpose of his visit next month to China was to discuss Hong Kong's future, reports Reuter.

He said on the British Broadcasting Corporation's world service that he wanted to make progress with Chinese leaders on the British colony after it reverted to Chinese rule in 1997.

This could happen only if mutual suspicions in Beijing and Hong Kong were removed, he said.