

BRIEFLY

Israel to release 400 Palestinians: Israel will release 400 Palestinian prisoners during the upcoming Muslim holiday Eid Ul-Azha this weekend, Defence Minister Moshe Arens was quoted as saying Wednesday, AP from Jerusalem reports.

Israel radio said Arens made the statement in Paris. His spokesman, Dan Naveh, could not be reached for comment. The prisoners release comes amid speculation of a possible linkage of a prisoner release to the freeing of Western hostages and missing Israeli soldiers in Lebanon. Arens denied there was a connection, the radio said.

There also were no reports of a planned release of Lebanese guerrillas held by Israeli-backed militiamen in south Lebanon whose freedom would be key to an exchange of prisoners and hostages.

Israel has traditionally freed Palestinian prisoners for Muslim holidays. The Hebrew daily Haaretz described the current plans as partly a response to a drop in the violence of the Palestinian uprising in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Sweden ready to buy Iranian oil: A Swedish official said Wednesday that Sweden is ready to buy Iranian crude oil and Swedish companies are interested in joint ventures with Iran, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported, AP from Nicosia says.

Rune Molin, Sweden's minister of industries who arrived in Iran on Monday made the remarks in a meeting with his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh, IRNA said.

Nematzadeh said in response that the volume of Tehran-Stockholm trade exchange in the 12 months ending March 20 doubled to 110 million dollars compared with the previous year, said the agency, monitored in Nicosia.

He also underlined the need for proper mechanisms to balance the economic relations between the two countries, IRNA said. It did not elaborate.

Blast kills six in Pakistan: Five children and their mother were killed when a pile of fireworks exploded on Wednesday in a house in the north-western Pakistani town of Mardan, police said, Reuter reports from Peshwar.

They said the children's father, a bus driver, had stored the fireworks to sell them during the Muslim festival of Eid-Ul-Azha next week. The cause of the blast was not known.

Columbia's drug lord surrenders: Columbia's most-wanted drug lord Pablo Escobar surrendered to authorities on Wednesday, local radio said, Reuter from Bogota reports.

RCN Radio said Escobar, boss of the powerful Medellin cocaine cartel, gave himself up to officials in the northern city of Medellin.

Accord on Kurdish autonomy soon: An agreement guaranteeing Kurdish autonomy is expected to be signed next week by the Iraqi government and Kurdish leaders, a government controlled-newspaper reported Wednesday, AP says from Baghdad.

Al-Thawra, the organ of Saddam Hussein's Bath Party, quoted Kurdish rebel leader Massoud Barani as saying that a "comprehensive agreement" had been reached.

The newspaper said the agreement would be signed following Eid-Ul-Azha, a three-day Muslim feast culminating the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. The feast begins on Saturday.

Sources in Baghdad said Wednesday that a top Kurdish leader was heading for Washington following meetings in Britain and Turkey.

Jalal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, left his rebel stronghold in Iraq's northeastern mountains last week for meetings with Turkish President Turgut Ozal.

Mudslide toll now 112 Chile: Police said on Wednesday that 40 people missing since a mudslide struck this Pacific coast city were dead, raising the official death toll in the disaster to 112, Reuter reports from Antofagasta.

Antofagasta police Chief Colonel Leopoldo Sotomayor told a news conference the 40 missing people were buried under tonnes of mud and rubble that swept away hillside slums on Tuesday.

He said only three of the 72 bodies recovered so far had not been identified and most of the victims were children.

15 injured in Karachi gunbattle: At least 15 people were injured in Karachi Wednesday in a gunbattle between two rival factions of the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) representing Urdu-speaking settlers, hospital sources and witnesses said, AFP from Karachi reports.

Paramilitary rangers and police have surrounded the area in Landhi eastern district, where shooting began in early Wednesday and was continuing in the afternoon, witnesses said.

The incident erupted following allegations by a dissident MQM group that the Sindh Province Chief Minister Jam Sadio Ali was conspiring against their party.

Pak measurers to combat terrorism Illegal arms holders to face life imprisonment

ISLAMABAD, June 20: The Pakistan government Thursday announced drastic measures with stiff penalties in a bid to clamp down on terrorism and increasing lawlessness in different parts of the country, reports PTI.

New Nepali Speaker sworn in

KATHMANDU, June 20: The oldest member of the Nepali Congress elected in the May 12 general election was sworn-in Wednesday as interim Speaker of the House of Representatives in an announcement from the Royal Palace said, reports AFP.

Khalil Minya, 74, who represents the Sunsari district about 290 kilometers (180 miles) southeast of the capital, took his oath from King Birendra as Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and other top officials looked on.

Meanwhile, the Election Commission announced that members of the National Assembly, the country's upper house, would be chosen June 26.

The House is to meet Thursday after 32 years of rule under the partyless panchayat system, which was dissolved by the King last year following two months of mass unrest.

The ruling Nepali Congress is expected to nominate a permanent speaker within days, a source said.

Holder of automatic weapons without proper licences have been ordered to hand them over to the authorities within a month or face life imprisonment and confiscation of their property.

Vehicles with tinted glass have also been banned.

The cabinet which held a special meeting Wednesday under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to review the Law and Order situation in the country, decided to introduce two ordinances to deter terrorist activities and check sectarian violence.

Under the special terrorist affected areas ordinance, special judges would be appointed with sweeping powers to impose stringent punishment on those found guilty.

The disturbed areas ordinance would help the authorities identify areas prone to sectarian violence in Punjab, and take remedial measures.

It will also give additional powers to the provincial authorities for recovering illicit arms, explosives and other weapons, the advisor to Prime Minister on Information and Broadcasting Sheikh Rashid Ahmed told reporters Wednesday.

The cabinet decision comes a day after a special judge in Karachi was shot dead by unknown assailants while he was on his way to the court. Six cases against Asif Ali Zardari, husband of former Premier, Ms Benazir Bhutto, were to be decided by this judge, Ahmed said.

Saddam fires Republican Guard chief, reshuffles Army

BAGHDAD, June 20: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein chaired a meeting on Wednesday of heads of divisions of the Iraqi army, the second meeting in as many days with senior officers amid reports of changes in the army leadership, reports AFP.

The official Iraqi News Agency (INA) said Defence Minister Hussein Kamel Hassan attended the meeting but did not reveal the nature of the discussions.

On Tuesday, Hussein chaired a meeting of commanders of the Iraqi army corps.

The weekly 'Alif Ba'a' news magazine reported earlier that the head of Iraq's elite Republican Guard, General Iyad Fatah Al-Rawi, had replaced Gen Rasheed Al-Takriti as Chief of Staff of the Iraqi

Army. The report did not say if Gen Rasheed had been sacked. "Gen Iyad Fatah Al-Rawi has replaced Gen Rasheed and has taken up his new duties," the paper said, without disclosing when the appointment was made.

Gen Rawi becomes the third Chief of Staff since the start of the Gulf crisis, triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait last August 2.

The move coincided with Baghdad's recent replacement of an Iraqi officer responsible for coordination with Allied forces in the north of the country.

Gen Abdel Wahab Mohammad Hussein replaced Gen Naswan Tahoun in the North after reports from Kurdish sources that the latter had

disappeared and may have been arrested by Iraqi authorities for "anti-regime activities".

Gen Rasheed was considered a "political officer" by analysts and had been appointed Chief of Staff in November at the height of the Gulf crisis.

His nomination was seen as a reassertion of authority in the army by Bath Party officers Loyal to President Hussein.

The new Chief of Staff, like his predecessor, was head of the Republican Guards, under direct command of President Hussein. He fought in the eight-year Iraq-Iran War, notably in the battle to liberate the town of Faw in March 1988.

Reuter adds from Nicosia: Convinced he was driven by a divine order, Iraqi President

Saddam Hussein believed until the last moments before the Gulf war that he could beat the world's most modern army, reports Reuter.

"All you need is that your weapons and soldiers stay under the ground and this advantage (air superiority) will be over," he told his generals during his last visit to occupied Kuwait in January.

A transcript of a tape smuggled out of Iraq and published by a leading Arabic daily gives an insight into how Saddam prepared his 'yes-sir' generals for the war against the United States and its Allies.

According to the London-based 'Al-Hayat', the tape contained the recording of a meeting between Saddam and his generals during a secret visit to occupied Kuwait on January 15 — two days before the US-led Allies began a 38 day aerial assault of Iraqi targets in Iraq and Kuwait.



BASA AIR BASE: Philippine Air Force F-8 Crusader planes lie on the ground June 19 covered with ash fallout that destroyed the Philippines' main fighter base. The planes, which have long been unusable, were left behind when Mount Pinatubo exploded in a powerful eruption June 15. Photo — AFP/UNB

Kuwait plans to fence border to check 'small Saddams'

CAIRO, June 20: Kuwait is considering the construction of a wall along its 280-kilometer (175-mile) border with Iraq to protect the Emirate from "small Saddams", Kuwait Interior Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Hammoud Al-Jaber said Wednesday, reports AFP.

The problem (with Iraq) is not only with Saddam, Sheikh Ahmad told the weekly Egyptian news magazine Al-Musawwar in reference to the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"He represents entire regime. They're all small Saddams. And if he did not succeed in occupying Kuwait he will undoubtedly try other

plans," the Kuwaiti official was quoted as saying. Sheikh Ahmed also reported that Kuwaiti authorities recently arrested arms traffickers who were attempting to smuggle weapons into the Emirate from Iraq.

Another report from Abu Dhabi says, a 26,000-strong Arab Coalition Force will be stationed in war-battered Kuwait as part of newly-arranged security setup in the post-War Gulf region, local press reported Wednesday.

The Arab Security Force is formed by 10,000 troops from Saudi Arabia, 10,000 from other Gulf Cooperation Council

(GCC) states — Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates besides Kuwait. Egypt and Syria each share 3,000 in the Saudi-led peace-keeping force, the UAE daily 'al-Khaleej' said.

The paper quoted informed sources in Kuwait as saying that Egypt will dispatch an armoured brigade and a regiment of special units to Kuwait.

The new arrangement has been accepted in principle by Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak during his one-day blitz visit Tuesday to Kuwait and Bahrain, the paper said.

Mubarak stressed in his

meeting with Kuwait's Amir that sending Egyptian troops to participate in the Liberation on Kuwait emanated from Egypt's principles and its Arab and national commitment.

In the 'Damascus declaration' signed in March, the foreign ministers of Egypt, Syria and six GCC states agreed to establish a 100,000-strong Arab Security Force with Egyptian and Syrian troops as its backbone.

Now, the revamped-force for Kuwait was a clear result of the eight-nation expert meeting Monday in Doha, Qatar.

Blast in Pak train: 5 killed

ISLAMABAD, June 20: Five people were killed and 30 injured by a powerful blast in a Pakistani passenger train on Thursday, the official AFP news agency said, reports Reuter.

The blast occurred when the train was at Wazirabad railway junction in Punjab Province, it said.

APP said the blast shook the entire junction, which is north of the provincial capital Lahore.

No cause for the blast was given. The train was waiting for a signal to leave for the industrial town of Faisalabad.

Sikhs threaten to cut off voters' index finger

NEW DELHI, June 20: Sikh militants battling Indian rule in Punjab have threatened to cut off the left index finger of anyone who votes in polls set for Saturday, an election candidate said on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

The left index finger of each Indian voter is marked with indelible ink to prevent multiple voting.

Subhash Chander Beri, a candidate in the Punjab city of Ludhiana where militants massacred train passengers on

Saturday, said the separatists had put out posters warning of the punishment for anyone defying their call for a poll boycott.

Sikh militants, who are fighting for an independent Sikh homeland they call Khalistan, or land of the pure, have killed 20 candidates in their campaign to sabotage the polls.

They say the national and regional elections are meant to give a facade of legitimacy to Indian rule over the rich

northern agricultural state. Punjab has been under direct rule from New Delhi for four years. The regional polls are meant to restore elected rule through a state assembly.

Beri, now sheltering in New Delhi, is standing for India's centrist Janata Dal Party in simultaneous elections for Punjab's 13 parliamentary seats.

Chief Election Commissioner TN Seshan said the ink mark would have to remain to deter fraudulent voting. He said the polls would not be postponed.

21 women members in West Bengal Assembly

CALCUTTA, June 20: The eleventh Assembly in West Bengal will have an all-time record number of 21 women members — 19 from the Left Front and two from the Congress-I, reports PTI.

The previous house had 13 members — all belonging to Left Front.

The Front had put up 221 candidates of the faisaex including eight new faces, the Congress-I, eleven and the BJP five.

Of the 19 Left Front winning women candidates 17 belonged to CPI (M) including a Tribal woman Arati Hamborn, who won from Ranibandh Constituency in Bankura and one each to Froward Bloc and Froward Bloc (Marxist) out of eleven. The two Congress-I women candidates emerging victorious are: Sabitri Mitra and Ruby Noor.

1.5m Muslims perform Hajj rituals today

MINA (Saudi Arabia), June 20: Hundreds of thousands of Muslims pilgrims thronged the outskirts of Mecca on Wednesday in preparation for the Hajj, or yearly pilgrimage, reports AP.

Tuesday, Iranian pilgrims gathered for a ceremony in which they condemned the United States as "The Great Satan".

Reports from Tehran said Iranian and Saudi Arabian officials were satisfied that there were no incidents during the ceremony.

More than 115,000 Iranians, as well as 1,000 Iraqis are among the estimated 1.5 million pilgrims from around the world who have gathered in Saudi Arabia for the Hajj.

On Friday they will stand together wearing white seamless robes — symbolic of purity — and pray in unison "Labbaik Allahumma Labbaik" (I have responded to your call O Lord).

Latecomers, from Jeddah, Medina or Mecca, piled atop crowded buses Wednesday clogging the various routes to

join those gathered at Mina, where the pilgrims are housed. The pilgrims held umbrellas and cardboard cartons over their heads as they stood in the 45c heat (113 F). Drinking water was distributed in the name of King Fahd.

Mina has become a sprawling tent city of air-conditioned tents under a multibillion-dollar Saudi programme to expand and renovate holy sites.

Wednesday, Iranian television, monitored Cyprus, broadcast a video of the "anti-paganism" rally Iranian pilgrims held Tuesday night.

The television showed thousands of pilgrims, including small groups of women in black chadors, waving posters of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and banners reading "Down With USA and 'Death To Israel'".

The people shook their fists in the air and shouted "Death to America," after their leader, Mohammad Rey-Shahri, delivered an impassioned address in Persian. His voice rising gradually to a feverish pitch.

Gag order imposed on Kennedy compound assault case

PALM BEACH (Florida), June 20: William Kennedy Smith's trial judge imposed a scaled-back gag order Wednesday, expressing her concern about publicity on matters that probably couldn't be used as evidence, reports AP.

Circuit Judge Mary Lupo ordered prosecutors, Palm Beach police, sheriff's and other law enforcement workers, defense attorneys and their investors, and all courtroom personnel to refrain from out-of-court commentary on the case.

But her order was less sweeping than restrictions she outlined in a June 7 hearing.

"In light of the prejudicial and inadmissible nature of material reported in the media, there exists a reasonable and substantial likelihood that jury pool may be improperly influenced and selection of an impartial jury impaired," Ms

Lupo's 13-page order said. She said she wasn't blaming anyone about the pre-trial publicity, but she said the court is deeply concerned with how the release of the alleged victim's polygraph results, generally inadmissible at trial, has polluted the prospective panel.

The judge had originally considered barring commentary from virtually all trial participants and restricting disclosure of witnesses' depositions.

News media attorneys argued against such sweeping restrictions, and the judge Wednesday excluded potential witnesses — except police —

from her order. Earlier proposals for the gag order would have barred comments from Smith, his alleged victim and potential witnesses including his uncle, Sen. Edward Kennedy. They were excluded from the gag order Wednesday.

Smith has made only terse comments on the allegations, which he denies. His alleged victim has made only brief statements through her attorney, and a lawyer for the senator has said he will voluntarily refrain from discussing Smith's case, other than to defend himself against courtroom attacks.

The Judge's order followed a hearing Wednesday in which she granted a continuance for Smith's lawyers to develop evidence to support their arguments that the rape case against him should be dismissed.

But Ms. Lupo said there would be no delay in Smith's Aug 5 trial. Smith, 30, has pleaded innocent to charges of second-degree sexual battery and misdemeanor battery in connection with the alleged rape at his family's Palm Beach estate on March 30.

Karmal returns to Kabul

MOSCOW, June 20: Babrak Karmal, the Afghanistan leader who invited Soviet troops into his country in 1979, returned to Kabul early Thursday after five years in the Soviet Union, Afghan diplomats said, reports AP.

Off the Record

Jumbo stopped for fleeing children

DARWIN, (Australia): An Australian Judge ordered a Jumbo Jet bound for Singapore to divert to Darwin on Wednesday night to let authorities take custody of two children from their fleeing father, according to police, reports Reuter.

The two children, aged seven and five, were removed from the Qantas Boeing 747 and delivered to Family Law Court officials in the northern Australian city, police said on Thursday.

Judge Hubert Frederico had earlier ruled in Melbourne that the children be returned to their mother after police had arrived too late at the city's airport to stop the children leaving.

Legal sources said it was the first time a family court judge had ordered an aircraft to land to stop children being taken out of this country.

The aircraft was flying over western Australia when the captain was ordered to make the 2,000 km (1,250 mile) detour to Darwin.

The father, who also left the aircraft, was apparently travelling with the children to Lebanon, according to Darwin's Family Law Court Registrar, Peter Liddle.

Details of the family are not released under Family Law Court Regulations.

"It appears the man has just snatched the kids and attempted to leave the country, Sergeant Dave Swift told reporters.

Cold war still on in Hong Kong

HONG KONG: Communism may be a thing of the past in eastern Europe and Perestroika may be the buzzword in the Soviet Union, but the cold war lives on in staunchly capitalist Hong Kong, reports Reuter.

Hong Kong authorities have barred 103 crewmen and their families aboard the Soviet training ship Pallada from landing in the British Colony during a two week visit.

The four-masted sailing ship has been tucked away at a remote anchorage among rusting freighters in Hong Kong's western harbour, far from the glittering waterfront of central district.

Hong Kong's Immigration Department refused to comment but government sources confirmed the crew had not been allowed to land, saying they did not have the required visas.

Love letters returned

LOS ANGELES: Comedienne Roseanne Barr has her love letters back and has settled her 35-million-dollar lawsuit against the National Enquirer and the Star, reports AP.

Miss Barr and her husband, Tom Arnold, sued the supermarket tabloids for publishing the allegedly pilfered love letters, written before they were married.

Terms of the settlement weren't disclosed. Miss Barr and Arnold would only say in a statement issued Tuesday that the agreement was "satisfactory."

The Enquirer and Star have returned the letters to Miss Barr and Mr. Arnold and stated they were sorry for any distress caused to Roseanne and Tom by this incident," the couple's publicist, David Brokaw, said in a statement.

Star editor Richard Kaplan's office in New York said there would be no comment.

"We continue to maintain our right to publish material that we believe has been sent to us legitimately," National Enquirer editor and president Iain Calder said in a statement. "However, we do sympathize with the distress felt by Roseanne and Tom at the loss of the letters, and are sorry they were upset by this incident."



BERLIN: (L-R) US Secretary of State James Baker, Greek Foreign Minister Antonius Samaras, Alexander Bessmertnykh of the Soviet Union, British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd (back R) and Paavo Vaerynen of Finland spend a break mingling during the CSCE Foreign Ministers' meeting June 19. Photo — AFP/UNB