

Prague agrees to separation referendum

PRAGUE, July 19: Czechoslovakia's parliament agreed Thursday to hold a referendum on the eventual separation of the country into the Czech republic and the Slovakia republic the CTK news agency reported, says AFP.

For the first time since its foundation in 1918, the Eastern European country has given legislative backing to a referendum to decide the future of Czechoslovakia.

The law, which was passed by the two houses of the federal assembly late Thursday was expected to defuse possible political crises in the coming months involving Czech and Slovak separatist movements, observers in Prague said.

A referendum bill was first proposed by President Vaclav Havel in December

Iraq no longer capable of developing nuclear arms

VIENNA, July 19: The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Thursday dismissed reports that Iraq possessed large quantities of enriched uranium capable of developing nuclear weapons, reports AFP.

But the IAEA Council of Governors condemned Baghdad for violating the international treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, saying it was "the first country" to have done so. IAEA Director General Hans Blix said after a meeting of the governors that on the basis of the installations disclosed by Iraq, the country was no longer capable of producing enriched uranium.

He described as 'speculation' reports that Baghdad possessed between 25 kilograms (55 pounds) to 40 kilograms (88 pounds) of the

material. The United States holds that Iraq has about 40 kilograms of enriched uranium.

Blix confirmed that Iraq had admitted possessing 500 grams (1.1 pounds) of enriched uranium, and said that according to IAEA inspectors, it would only have been able to produce a maximum of three kilograms (6.6 pounds) of enriched uranium.

In Baghdad, Iraq announced that it had disclosed all its nuclear material and equipment, according to the head of an IAEA mission there.

The agency called on Iraq to place all its fissionable materials under the control of the IAEA.

Iraq in 1969 signed the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons which obliges signatory countries not to acquire or manufacture nu-

clear weapons.

The head of a 37-member IAEA mission Dimitri Pericos said in Baghdad that the Iraqi Nuclear Energy Commission had given a pledge that it had declared all its nuclear installations and equipment to the agency.

Other IAEA missions would visit Iraq however because some points remained to be clarified, Pericos said.

In Vienna, Blix told a press conference that the IAEA had suspended all aid and technical assistance to Iraq following the UN sanctions imposed after the invasion of Kuwait.

No member country had demanded Iraq's expulsion from the IAEA, he said.

Regarding quantities of enriched uranium that France and the Soviet Union had provided to Iraq for research purposes, Blix said that operations to recover the material would begin September, led by British and French companies.

The IAEA Director General added that the Iraqi violations had highlighted weaknesses in the agency's monitoring system and predicted that safeguards would be necessary, including security the right to inspect installations on the basis of confidential information.

He added that the agency had submitted a plan to the US Security Council to recover Iraq's store of enriched uranium and to safeguard against further violations.

Another report from Washington adds: The United States is deadly serious in preventing Iraq from arming itself with nuclear weapons, Defence Secretary Dick Cheney said Thursday.

"We simply cannot afford a situation in which Iraqi President Saddam Hussein acquires a nuclear weapon", Cheney said in an interview with a US news agency.

The United States, he added, was still waiting for Iraq to produce a comprehensive report on its efforts to produce nuclear, bacteriological and chemical weapons.

The United Nations has given Baghdad until July 25 to present such a report in accordance with the April 3 Security Council resolution setting out conditions for a ceasefire in the Gulf war

US Senate body okays \$4.6b for 'Star Wars'

WASHINGTON, July 19: The Senate Armed Services Committee Wednesday voted 16-4 to provide 4.6 billion dollars to develop a ground-based Anti-Ballistic Missile system by 1996, instead of a space based system favoured by the White House, reports AFP.

The Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) proposal, popularly known as 'Star Wars' which is included in the 291-billion-dollar 1992 defence budget, also urges President George Bush to renegotiate the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with the Soviet Union.

The SDI measure will be sent to the full Senate for a vote late this month.

The Senate panel relegated to a later stage the space-based brilliant pebble technology preferred by Bush, who has threatened to veto any defence package that does not fit his plans for the SDI.

The House of Representatives has already approved a 2.7 billion-dollar SDI package. Senator Sam Nunn, the democratic committee chairman halted the SDI package.

Mandela selects shadow cabinet

JOHANNESBURG, July 19: African National Congress leaders on Thursday called for widespread pressure on the government to continue reforms, but also indicated some willingness to compromise, reports AP.

The black opposition group's leaders, meeting for the first time since being elected last month, selected a 'working committee' balanced between those with hard-line views on ending apartheid and members of more moderate views.

Also Thursday, a newspaper published an interview with Nelson Mandela in which the ANC president said the group would make concessions to get negotiations started on ending apartheid.

"We are going on with negotiations," Mandela told the Star newspaper, "I am going out of my way to tell our people publicly that negotiation is the only method."

The ANC has been boycotting Constitutional talks with President F.W. de Klerk's government because of charges the government was responsible for political violence and

has delayed releasing political prisoners. Mandela's new comments appeared to mark a softening of ANC policy.

The composition of the committee, which is intended to act as a shadow cabinet to the ANC executive committee, indicates it is likely to support Mandela's call for negotiations along with mass action, such as strikes and protests, aimed at pressuring the government to continue reforms.

The ANC has demanded an interim national government and a constituent assembly that would negotiate a new constitution, but Mandela told the Star that "if the mutual confidence is there it is not necessary actually to form the interim government before we go on negotiating."

The 20-member committee elected Thursday includes Thabo Mbeki, considered a moderate; Chris Hani, head of the ANC military wing; communist party chief Joe Slovo and former ANC secretary-general Alfred Nzo, a moder-

2,357 dowry deaths in India

Indian police registered 878 cases of murder of brides for more dowry and 1,479 cases of dowry suicide in 1990, parliament was told on Thursday, reports AFP from New Delhi.

Home Minister S B Chavan said in a written reply that in addition another 2,478 deaths had been registered under section 304-B of the Indian Penal Code, which lists as dowry-related the suicide of a bride within seven years of her marriage.

Other crimes against women in the year included more than 9,500 cases of rape, 20,000 molestation charges and 11,000 abductions, the minister said.

Dowry murders, usually carried out by the groom and his family to force additional payments, most often take the form of burning disguised as kitchen accidents, and seldom get to court for lack of witnesses.

16 killed during Zaire rally: Sixteen people including two soldiers were killed during a demonstration organised by one of Zaire's opposition parties, the party said Thursday, AFP reports from Kinshasa.

The deaths occurred at Luena, near Kolwezi, in the far south-eastern province of Shaba (ex-Katanga) last Sunday, the Union of Independent Federalists and Republicans said.

The party, headed by one-time Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Nguzi Karl I Bond, gave no details.

State radio reported that young party militants had set fire to a school. Security forces intervened, rioting broke out and seven people including two soldiers were killed, the report said.

Body of Soviet hostage found: Navy divers have found the body of a Soviet mining expert who was kidnapped and killed by separatist rebels in remote Assam state, a news agency reported Friday, says AP from New Delhi.

The body of Sergei Gritchenko was discovered in the Burdighing river on Thursday by six navy divers, United News of India said.

Gritchenko was kidnapped July 1 by the United Liberation Front of Assam, an ethnic militia fighting for independence for the hilly, northeastern state of India.

The rebels said July 9 they killed Gritchenko when he tried to escape after attacking a guard. It is not clear when the purported incident took place.

The rebels also say native Assamese are being swamped by Bengali immigrants from other parts of India. Scores of people have been killed in the insurgency, which escalated two years ago with bomb attacks, ambushes on police and kidnappings.

Arens names Air Force chief: Brig Gen Harzi Budinger, a veteran combat fighter pilot, was named the next air force commander Thursday, defence officials said, AP from Jerusalem says.

He will take over from Maj Gen Avihu Bin-Nun on Jan 1, 1992. Bin-Nun had agreed to a request from Chief of Staff Ehud Barak to serve an extra three months beyond his four-year term.

Budinger's appointment was approved by Defence Minister Moshe Arens. A defence ministry statement said the 48-year-old Budinger has extensive combat experience and has commanded the air force flight school and was head of air force general staff.

Beijing, Moscow to attend ASEAN meet: China and the Soviet Union received a restrained welcome Friday as they attended for the first time an annual meeting of the once firmly anti-communist Association of Southeast Asian Nations, reports AP.

Their first official presence marked a significant change in ASEAN's relations with Moscow and Beijing. The two communist nations have both made overtures to the booming ASEAN region for years but have been spurned as perceived security threats.

Soviet First Deputy Premier Yuri Maslyukov and Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen attended the 24th opening of the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting as guests of the Malaysian government.

200 killed in Lankan battle

COLOMBO, July 19: The death toll in the battle between government troops and Tamil guerillas rose by more than 200 in the past 24 hours as fierce fighting continued near a key army camp under rebel siege in northern Sri Lanka, a military spokesman here said, reports AFP.

The spokesman said government troops lost 15 more soldiers including an officer in heavy fighting with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerillas a few kilometers (miles) away from the Elephant Pass camp.

He said some 200 more LTTE guerillas were also killed when they came under attack by advancing troops backed by air force helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft.

The latest deaths took the toll 68 soldiers and 703 LTTE dead in the ten-day old elephant pass battle, the spokesman said.

AP adds: The army has destroyed several vehicles and now the rebels are finding it difficult to evacuate the seri-

ously injured," the official said.

In a bid to prevent rebel reinforcements, the military is also conducting operations in other northern regions, including Mannar, Mullaitivu, Vavunya and Jaffna, he said.

Defence Secretary Gen. Cyril Ranatunga said Thursday that the stocks of food, ammunition and medicines in the Elephant Pass camp would last for weeks.

The camp is the most strategic of the four military garrisons in the north, which include an air base near Jaffna town and a naval base on the northeastern coast.

At least 18,000 people have been killed in the nine-year-old insurgency that grew out of complaints that the majority Sinhalese discriminate against Tamils in jobs and education.

Tamils form 18 percent of Sri Lanka's 16 million people. Most of them live in the northern and eastern provinces where the Tamil Tigers want to set up the independent nation.

Tehri dam an invitation to disaster

NEW DELHI, July 19: Indian conservationists are pushing the government to scrap a huge, Soviet-aided dam in the Himalayas where experts believe an earthquake with the force of 10,000 atom bombs is waiting to strike, reports AP.

But they are fighting a powerful lobby of politicians, engineers and builders determined to make the three-billion-dollar Tehri Dam a reality.

ND Jayal, Director of the Natural Heritage Cell at the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), calls the project an invitation to disaster.

The dam should be built to withstand a quake strong enough to uproot and throw objects into the air, but has been hopelessly under-designed, he said.

Seismologists believe a quake with a magnitude of 8.5 on the Richter Scale is almost a certainty during the lifetime of the Dam. Such a quake would unleash the same energy as 10,000 Hiroshima-size bombs exploding at the same time.

The dam has been designed to withstand an earthquake of magnitude to 7.2, Jayal said, but an earthquake of 8.5

would unleash 300 times as much energy.

"Imagine you are sitting in a room where a bomb drops and maybe you are either not hurt or escape with injury," said Jayal, whose organisation is at the forefront of a campaign against the project.

"Then imagine a bomb 300 times as powerful drops. Then what happens? To proceed with the dam is an act of great folly. It is a total subversion of the environmental system. It would have catastrophic consequences".

Last week, Jayal sent missives urging a second look at the dam's design to practically all top government officials, from the President and the Prime Minister on down. He acted after project authorities approached the Finance Ministry's public investments board for an approval that would open up the government's coffers. Project authorities and builders followed up with large newspaper advertisements extolling the "necklace of the Himalayas".

They cited the dam's benefits, including the generation of 2,400 megawatts of electricity, the creation of irrigation facilities for 270,000



Belgrade: Croatian soldiers lay siege to a Serbian-owned house in Osijek. A Serb inside was killed and his mother's hands blown off by a bomb.

Croatia calls for foreign buffer force against federal army

BONN, July 19: Franjo Tudjman, President of the breakaway Yugoslav Republic of Croatia, called Thursday for a foreign buffer force to be sent to Yugoslavia if the federal army attacked Croatia or Slovenia, reports AFP.

Bloody fighting has rocked both republics since they declared independence of June 25.

Tudjman, speaking after talks with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher, also said he believed the chances of Croatia remaining part of Yugoslavia were dwindling day by day.

Although he did not think the army was likely to attack in the next 48 hours it is very possible in the next 48 days, he said.

During their meeting, Kohl made fresh appeals from dialogue in Yugoslavia saying the aim at this critical moment must be to avoid any threat or use of force, according to his spokesman Dieter Vogel.

In Zagreb, European Community ceasefire observers began setting up their headquarters in a hotel after vio-

lence in Croatia overnight left at least one person dead.

They later toured the east of the republic, but stressed that their mission was not to intervene in bloody clashes that have shaken the region.

AP from Knin (Yugoslavia) adds: Both commanders wear the same camouflage, but one is a Serb and the other Croat. Seventy miles (110 kilometers) apart in the most other bitterly divided part of a country at war with itself, they are training for a showdown.

A wiry man with graying hair and a mysterious past commands 12,000 heavily armed Serbs in Knin, the heart of the ethnic Serb rebellion against Croatian authorities.

He calls himself Captain Dragan.

His headquarters is in a bunker in the medieval fortress perched atop a hill overlooking Knin. A Serbian flag flies defiantly from the stone structure.

Ivo Jelic, commander of a brigade of the Croatian national guard, promised the flag won't be there for long.

"The Croatian flag will flutter from the fortress of Knin,"

said Jelic, a burly former lieutenant colonel of the Yugoslav federal army.

"It will cost many, many lives," he said. "But we are prepared, and they are prepared for that."

Knin is the center of the Serb-populated region of Krajina. The region says it will split from Croatia if the republic insists of seceding from Yugoslavia.

The Croatian government is under pressure from hard-line nationalists to crack down on Krajina. A military move against Krajina would almost certainly draw a Serbian response, plunging the two largest Yugoslav republics into war.

The two men who would be front-line commanders in such a fight talked to The Associated Press in separate interviews this week.

There was no sign that either side was prepared to obey a federal presidency directive to lay down their arms by midnight Thursday.

Captain Dragan, who declines to disclose his last name, said his troops are ready.

Russia, Lithuania sign treaty on relations

MOSCOW, July 19: Russian Federation president Boris N. Yeltsin said his giant republic would regard Lithuania as "a sovereign state" once the two republics sign a treaty on their relations July 29, Russian television said, reports AP.

Yeltsin and Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis announced the completion of work on a treaty governing relations between the two republics after more than two hours of talks in Moscow, Russian television reported.

The two leaders appeared weary as they spoke to journalists, and the state news agency Tass said that there had been "differences over a number positions."

Lithuania is one of six republics seeking independence from the Soviet Union.

I'm cool, says French PM

WASHINGTON, July 19: French Prime Minister Edith Cresson in a US television interview aired Thursday admitted her outspokenness gets her into trouble but added that she did not fear controversy, reports AFP.

"I'm not here to be having an easy life," Mrs Cresson told ABC television, adding that she was not overly concerned about the flap surrounding her controversial views. "I'm cool," she said.

Rather than back down from her past comments on the prevalence of homosexuality in Anglo-Saxon culture or the workaholic tendency of the Japanese, the Prime Minister reinforced her views on camera.

Personally, she said, she preferred heterosexuality. "I think it's better."

Mrs Cresson said she was being judged more harshly because she is a woman who does not play the male game of promising easy answers.

"Politics has always been considered a ground for men... Men think they have sort of a vocation to command... I say, in general, that you can replace men everywhere, except in private life," she said.

Off the Record

Raisa raises glamour stakes

LONDON: Soviet first lady Raisa Gorbachev cut a stylish figure at the side of President Mikhail Gorbachev on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

All smiles, she arrived with Gorbachev for a news conference with British Prime Minister John Major, at which the two leaders announced an unprecedented partnership between the Soviet Union and the West.

Gorbachev, with her taste for Italian haute couture, raised the glamour stakes at an already stylish spouses' summit.

French fashion designer Pierre Cardin once called her one of the most elegant women in the world.

Stunning Mila Mulrony, wife of Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulrony, captured the limelight from the first moment, appearing in a dazzling all-white suit on Monday to greet summit hostess Norma Major.

That evening for a night at the theatre, she again went for white a skin-tight Jersey dress.

Norma Major, wife of British Prime Minister John Major, found the spotlight trained on her as she made her debut as hostess at a key international gathering.

Gay union blessed

PHOENIX: About 150 gay couples had their relationships blessed Thursday by a pastor who founded a church to serve homosexuals and lesbians, reports AP.

The couples stood with arms around one another as the Rev. Troy Perry, head of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, recited an approximation of marriage vows.

Then, at Perry's suggestion, the couples embraced and kissed.

"The world tells us you can't do that," Perry said. "They say you can't touch another that you love. But you certainly can."

As the hugs continued, he added, "This can continue in the bedroom."

Troy founded the church in 1968. It now has about 200 congregations across the country. The service was part of the church's biennial conference.

The conference met as the Episcopal Church's governing convention met in Phoenix and debated whether the church should sanction homosexual relationships and ordain gay priests. Episcopal leaders reaffirmed their stand against sexual relations outside heterosexual marriage, but acknowledged that many church members don't heed the policy.

Shahara shrinking

WASHINGTON: Despite reports of global warming and African drought, the Sahara desert has shrunk markedly since 1984, following a substantial expansion over the previous four years, scientists say, reports AP.

In a report in Friday's edition of the journal Science, the researchers said their satellite measurements of the world's largest desert over the last decade aren't enough to declare a trend, but they did express surprise at what one termed the "unbelievable" fluctuations from year to year.

For example, the Sahara grew from 3.4 million square miles (8.8 million square kilometers) in 1980 to 3.9 million square miles (10.1 million square kilometers) in just four years, including an expansion of 218,000 square miles (566,800 square kilometers) from 1983 to 1984, they said. And just a year later, they found it had shrunk by 282,000 square miles (733,300 square kilometers).

The studies, part of an overall programme assessing global climate change, were performed by two NASA scientists, Compton J. Tucker and William W. Newcomb, at the space agency's Laboratory for Terrestrial Physics in Greenbelt, Md. and by Harold E. Dregne of Texas Tech University's International Center for Arid and Semi-Arid Land Studies.

"What has been a tremendous surprise to us is the inter-annual variation, it's what I would have thought unbelievable," Dregne said in a telephone interview.

The scientists said they still don't know why it's happening or what the long-term outlook is. "It would require a decade-long study to determine whether long-term expansion or contraction of the Sahara is occurring," according to the report of the three scientists.