

BRIEFLY

Parliamentary polls in Iran Apr 10:

Iran said on Thursday parliamentary polls would be held on April 10 — a crucial contest for President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, reports Reuter from Nicosia.

Rafsanjani's hardline opponents dominate the present 270-seat Majlis, which was elected in 1988, before the death of Islamic Revolutionary Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The election will give Rafsanjani supporters, who are relative moderates in Iran's clearly-dominated politics, a chance to capture the hardliners' last bastion of power. But a bitter row over election laws remains unresolved.

Discovery to be launched Jan 22:

The space shuttle Discovery is set to be launched on January 22 for a week-long scientific research mission, the National Space and Aeronautic Administration (NASA) announced Thursday, reports AFP from Florida.

Discovery is to blast off at 8:53 am (1353 GMT) with seven astronauts aboard, including a German physicist and neurologist who will become the second Canadian and first Canadian woman to venture into orbit. The crew will conduct medical experiments on one another and will bring along an animal and plant cosmic crew that will include fruit flies, roundworms, slime mold, lentil roots and wheat and oat seedlings.

More than 200 scientists from 13 countries are collaborating with NASA on the seven-day mission that is the 45th shuttle flight and the first space lab mission since last summer.

Bush leaves Japan for home:

US President George Bush left Japan Friday for home after a 12-day Asia-Pacific tour which also took him to Australia, Singapore and South Korea, reports Reuter.

The trip was intended to boost American trade and help the United States out of recession ahead of Bush's re-election bid in November. Yet the most striking image from his Tokyo stay was of his collapse at a banquet on Wednesday.

Bush, who dismissed his illness as 24-hour flu, appeared well and in good spirits this morning when he and his wife Barbara said farewell to Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, Kyodo news agency said.

Mujahideen commander killed:

Gunmen killed an Afghan guerrilla commander on Thursday in the north-western Pakistani town of Peshawar, guerrilla sources said, reports Reuter from Pakistan.

The three gunmen shot Ashiqullah Talib, 36, as he left his home in Peshawar for a UN office where he worked on a project to clear land-mines in Afghanistan. The three escaped in a pick-up truck, the sources said.

Talib was a commander of the Hezb-I-Islami party of radical guerrilla leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in the eastern Afghan province of Konar bordering Pakistan, Hezb sources said.

Other guerrilla leaders have been killed by rivals during the 13-year-old Afghan civil war. Gunmen killed a commander of the Ittehad-I-Islami guerrilla party on 25 December as he drove to Peshawar after crossing from the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar.

Russia to cut secret service agents:

Russia plans to cut the number of secret service agents working in its missions abroad, Tass news agency quoted Russian first Deputy Prime Minister Gennady Burbulis as saying Thursday, reports AFP from London.

Tass, monitored by the BBC in London, quoted Burbulis as telling Foreign Ministry officials that the secret services working undercover in embassies in foreign countries would be "alimmed down to minimum levels required to maintain state security".

Israeli action delays talks: Ashrawi

WASHINGTON, Jan 10: Palestinian and Jordanian negotiators arrived here Thursday for the third bilateral round of the Mideast peace conference and blamed Israel for a delay in the talks, reports AFP.

"We are here today after a delay that was imposed upon us by an action that threatens the peace process," Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi said, referring to an Israel deportation order issued last week against 12 Palestinian activists from the occupied territories.

The Arab delegations to this round of the peace talks, initially scheduled for Tuesday, postponed their departure in protest. They ultimately agreed to attend after the U.N Security Council approved a resolution strongly condemning the Israeli decision, announced a day after a Jewish

settler was killed on the Gaza Strip.

Ashrawi insisted that discussions with Israel must be held under a two-track approach of separate talks between Israel and the Palestinians on one hand and Israel and the Jordanians on the other.

A complex dispute over that issue prevented negotiators from even entering a conference room during talks here in December. Israel then insisted on meeting with the Jordanians and Palestinians as a joint delegation.

"If Israel really wants to make peace it must negotiate with the Palestinians" separately, Ashrawi said.

She also said Israeli negotiators' announced plans to leave Washington next Wednesday would leave the delegations with too little time to engage in serious talks.

Georgian interim govt to hold polls soon

LONDON, Jan 10: The provisional government set up in Georgia since the flight on Monday of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia has said it will organise elections "in the next few months," Tass news agency said late on Thursday, reports AFP.

The agency, monitored in London by the BBC, said the announcement came in a document entitled "the political thinking of the provisional government of the republic of Georgia," signed by strongman Tengiz Sigua and released by Georgian officials in Moscow.

The document also said that Georgia would decide on its future relations with the 11-republic Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) once a new parliament had been elected and installed.

The Gamsakhurdia regime kept Georgia out of the Commonwealth, a loose grouping which was set up last month by 11 of the 15 former Soviet republics.

The Georgian document promised that the new authorities in Tbilisi would "create every condition for new parliamentary elections to take place in the next few months in a peaceful, stable atmosphere," Tass said.

The first steps aimed at restoring civil accord and peace in Georgia, on the basis of guarantees of the interests and rights of ethnic minorities, have already been taken," the documents said.

Apart from Georgia, the other former Soviet republics which did not join the CIS were the three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which are now independent.

Russia testing our resilience: Kravchuk
Yeltsin rejects Ukraine's claim to Black Sea Fleet

MOSCOW, Jan 10: Russian President Boris Yeltsin on Thursday flatly rejected Ukraine's claim to inherit the huge Black Sea Naval Fleet in the carve-up of the armed forces of the former Soviet Union, reports Reuter.

"No one is taking the Black Sea Fleet from Russia, and that includes Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk," Tass news agency quoted Yeltsin as telling workers at an arms factory in Ulyanovsk. "The Black Sea Fleet was, is and will be Russian."

Kravchuk told senior officers in Kiev that Russia had stopped delivering military supplies to Ukraine since he demanded that all servicemen on the territory — including those in the fleet — swear loyalty to the republic.

"They are testing our resilience," Kravchuk said.

On Wednesday he declared Kiev would take over the 300-vessel fleet in July, despite Russia's insistence that it stay under the joint control of the new Commonwealth of former Soviet republics.

Under the terms of the agreement signed last month

by leaders of the republics, each has the right to set up its own conventional armed forces. Ukraine has said it will do so.

"Strategic forces are supposed to come under



Commonwealth command, but Ukraine and Russia interpret the word differently.

Ukraine takes strategic, to mean simply nuclear, and has said it wants to be non-nuclear by 1994. The Black Sea Fleet carries no strategic nuclear weapons but has short range tactical nuclear weapons.

Vitaliy Lazorkin, chief adviser to Ukrainian Defence Minister Konstantin Morozov,

told a Moscow news conference all the tactical weapons were lying in depots and would shortly be destroyed.

Russia takes the view that even a non-nuclear Black Sea Fleet has strategic role to play in the Mediterranean on behalf of all Commonwealth countries.

The Commander-in-Chief of the still unified Soviet Navy, Admiral Vladimir Chernavin, dismissed an assertion by Morozov that Ukraine was "a maritime power."

Excuse me, but when has Ukraine been a great maritime power without ever having had its own fleet Chernavin told the conservative Sovetskaya Rossiya newspaper.

However, he reiterated an offer to transfer part of the Black Sea Fleet to Ukraine to fulfil purely local tasks.

Even this offer seemed fraught with problems. Fleet Commander-in-Chief Admiral Igor Kasatonov has said there is no question of his men swearing allegiance to Kiev, and some have already been transferred out of Ukraine for refusing to do so.

Yeltsin's remarks came

during a tour of central Russian cities on the Volga River to see the effects of his radical economic reform programme.

The broad abolition of state price controls one week ago, leading to huge rises in the prices of ever basic foodstuffs, has caused widespread public dismay.

Yeltsin, speaking through a megaphone from the construction scaffold of an airliner, told workers he expected the economic decline to bottom out in six to eight months and asked them not to lose patience with the government.

Radio Russia said that from Friday, the government was banning the export of consumer goods in very short supply, including essential foods and industrial goods.

The ban will not apply to other Commonwealth states who do not themselves restrict exports to Russia.

The rebel military council running Georgia after driving Gamsakhurdia out on Monday has threatened to break up any rally.



TBILISI: The mother of shooting incident victim Levon Taktakashvili cries at the gravesite of a cemetery. The young man was shot during a demonstration of supporters of Georgia's President Gamsakhurdia on Jan 9.

Iran dismisses US warning

TEHRAN, Jan 10: Iran's spiritual guide Ali Khamenei on Thursday dismissed a US warning over his country's arms purchases, reports AFP.

"The way we acquire arms is none of your business," he said, adding "should countries that want to buy arms first ask for permission from the United States?"

He was speaking to residents of the Muslim holy city of Qom, Iranian television said.

His comments followed a US State Department warning Tuesday for Iran not to purchase nuclear technology or weapons from the former Soviet republics.

Air strikes kill 100 porters in Myanmar

MEASOT (Thailand), Jan 10: More than 100 Myanmar civilians ferrying ammunition for government troops fighting guerrillas in eastern Myanmar have been killed by government air strikes, Thai police said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

That border patrol police in Mae Sot said the porters were accidentally hit this week by stray bombs dropped by Myanmar military planes flying sorties against guerrillas near their Azien camp opposite to the Thai border town of Umphang.

Birendra may reclaim power

KATHMANDU, Jan 10: Nepal's King Birendra has broken a two-year silence which analysts here believe could signal his willingness to take steps to reclaim his former powers in the event of the



left 500 people dead led to its transformation from monarchical rule to multi-party democracy.

Analysts said the king broke his two-year silence in order to show the nation he was not cut off from the mainstream of Nepal's political life.

They also said that as the interview came at a time when murder and outbreaks of violence were becoming increasingly commonplace across Nepal, it could be part of a bigger plan by the king and his followers to be ready to assert power in the event of the failure of the elected government.

Assessing the 1990 agitation and demonstration which led to Nepal's transformation from a constitutional monarchy to a multi-party democracy, the king said, "the desire for a change was much more in the nature of Nepal's joining the international trend for multi-party democracy."

"This would have been the decisive factor regardless of the strength and weakness of the previous system."

"Unforeseen economic factors and the question of political change within Nepalese Society coincided with changes in the international arena.

Britain deploys 1,000 more troops to combat IRA blitz

BELFAST, Jan 10: Britain mobilised 1,000 extra troops to combat an IRA blitz on Belfast but it didn't stop the killing and bombing in the northern Ireland conflict, reports Reuter.

Within hours of the major new troop deployments, the IRA switched target cities and set off a car bomb outside police headquarters in Londonderry on Thursday night. No one was injured in the blast.

Protestant extremists, boasting that they would succeed where British security forces had failed, shot dead the catholic owner of a chip van.

The Ulster Freedom fight-

ers acknowledged responsibility for killing 28-year-old Philip Campbell and said "unlike the government, we have the will to take on Republican paramilitaries, and no amount of failed security force policy will deter us from our task in 1992."

The Irish Republican Army, sharply escalating its economic warfare against Britain, has devastated Belfast with six car bombs in the last two months that have caused millions of pounds worth of damage and severely shaken the city's investment prospects.

On Thursday, Britain respond with a security clamp-down, mobilising 1,000 troops

from the locally recruited Ulster defence regiment and putting them on full-time duty.

A "ring of steel" was thrown round Belfast with round-the-clock check points on all main roads causing massive traffic jams. Security surveillance was stepped up and tighter protection given to buildings considered high security risks.

On Thursday night, three men were charged in connection with the latest IRA car bomb this week that sent shattered glass and twisted metal crashing down onto Belfast high street.

Police said they are due in court today. Security chiefs have been

Rebels kill 23 in Mozambique

MAPUTO, Jan 10: Rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) killed at least 23 people on Tuesday night in an attack on the town of Macia, in the southern province of Gaza, according to a report on Radio Mozambique today, reports AFP.

Macia lies on the country's main north-south road about 120 Kms (75 miles) north of Maputo.

According to a local government spokesman cited by the radio, a further 25 people were wounded, six of them seriously. The rebels also looted 15 houses, and kidnapped several local residents. During the incursion, troops killed two of the rebels.

This was the second day running that Macia had come under attack on Monday night, Renamo raided the outskirts of the town and killed three people.

Meanwhile, the armed forces general staff on Thursday issued a press release claiming that troops had killed 181 rebels

Yang Shangkun in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 10: Chinese President Yang Shangkun arrived in Malaysia today for a five-day stated visit aimed at strengthening ties and boosting bilateral trade, reports Reuter.

Yang and his 68-member delegation were met on arrival from Singapore by minister in the Prime Minister's department Abang Abu Bakar.

Yang said he hoped his visit would enhance relations with Malaysia, where ethnic Chinese form about one-third of the 17.8 million population.

He was due to attend an official welcoming ceremony in parliament and to meet King Sultan Azlan Shah later today.

He will hold talks with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on Saturday.

Blast near 10 Downing Street

LONDON, Jan 10: An explosion occurred shortly after 9:00 am Friday near the Prime Minister's residence in central London, police said, reports AFP.

The blast was at Whitehall place, 300 meters (yards) from 10 Downing Street, Prime Minister John Major's residence, a spokesman said.

Police could not say if the explosion was due to a bomb or was accidental.

Off the Record

Are we aliens to earth?

LONDON: The seeds of life on earth may have originated in organic material from outer space, according to noted US astronomer Carl Sagan, reports Reuter.

Sagan said in a nature magazine article today that the terrestrial origins of life conceded with the final stages of a heavy bombardment of the solar system by meteorites containing carbon-rich compounds, some 3.5 to 3.8 billion years ago.

During the bombardment, biogenic elements were delivered to the earth's surface that may have contributed directly to the inventories of biological ingredients needed to start life, Sagan said.

Scientists are aware of this heavy bombardment through radioactive dating to cratered surfaces on the moon and other planets.

A more commonly held theory on the origins of life is that chemical reactions on earth led to the formation of organic molecules.

But Sagan said computer models of the earth at a primordial stage and analysis of interplanetary dust particles, which shows they are rich in organic molecules, raises the possibility that meteors could have been the dominant source of the molecules that started life.

Crime does pay

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia may make prisoners pay for their jail stay to help the government maintain its overcrowded prisons, a minister said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

"They should pay for staying in prisons, not the nation nor the taxpayers," Justice Minister Syed Hamid Albar said to the National Bernama News Agency.

He said the Cabinet this week discussed ways to overcome prison congestion including a proposal to do away with jail sentences for petty crimes.

Syed Hamid said the Government might also put prisoners to work in sectors where there was a labour shortage like construction and manufacturing.

"Part of their pay will go towards paying for their stay in prison while the rest will be given to them on release," he said. There are about 25,000 prisoners currently held at 36 prisons in Malaysia.

"We don't want to see the day when criminals have no fear for prison, regarding them merely as a place for vacation as is happening in some countries in the west," Syed Hamid was quoted as saying.

Bush alright, but Quayle? Yikes!

CHICAGO: Nobody panicked but there was a lot of nervous laughter about Vice President Dan Quayle as Americans reacted on Wednesday to President George Bush's collapse in Tokyo, reports Reuter.

Asked about the prospect of Quayle taking over the presidency if Bush died or became too ill to continue in office, an electric utility worker in Chicago responded: "Yikes!"

"I don't think (Quayle) is either ready or able" Chicago sandwich shop owner Sal Gallano said.

The reaction of broker's assistant Mark Russo to that prospect was typical: "God forbid. If (Quayle) took office the motor companies (stocks) would plummet."

AP from Washington says that Quayle dismissed questions about his qualifications as a potential successor by saying he is ready to do his job as necessary. He told reporters the possibility of having to take over didn't cross his mind, because he knew Bush was not seriously ill.

According to a November survey 53 per cent of Americans says they do not think him qualified to serve as president.

Bush has praised Quayle's vice presidential performance as first class, and guaranteed his spot on the ticket in 1992 long in advance. Quayle is on the letterhead, on the campaign button, and on the road for Bush.

Tigers storm Lankan security post, kill 8

COLOMBO, Jan 10: Tamil guerrillas attacked a security post outside Sri Lanka's main naval base, killing eight sailors and wounding six in a fresh wave of violence, defence officials here said today, reports AFP.

Gunmen believed to be from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil (LTTE) stormed the checkpoint on a causeway linking the islet of Kraimagar with the northern Jaffna peninsula overnight, an official said.

The naval base is located on the islet but the Jaffna peninsula is virtually under rebel control. Officials believe that the attackers may have used a small boat to surprise the sailors.

A military spokesman here said he was aware of the incident, but they were awaiting details of the strike which came a day after LTTE gunmen

wiped out eight soldiers and wounded three more in an ambush in eastern province. "Tigers will intensify the attacks to boost their flagging morale," an official said. "We will have to expect more of these hit-and-run attacks," added a defence official.

The LTTE is leading a bloody 19-year-old campaign to establish a separate state in Sri Lanka's northeast where the two million Tamil minority is concentrated. Thousands of people have died in fighting.

AP adds: A Parliamentary committee met Friday to examine public proposals for a political solution to Sri Lanka's 8-year-old civil war that has claimed at least 17,000 lives.

The committee, comprising 25 government and 20 opposition lawmakers, was headed by Mangala Moonasinghe of the main opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

Gen Nawaz, US officials talk military matters

WASHINGTON, Jan 10: Pakistani army chief General Asif Nawaz rounded off a week-long visit to the United States Thursday during which he discussed military matters and regional security including Afghanistan peace moves with US officials, Pakistan embassy officials said, reports AFP.

General Nawaz held meetings with top US military and Pentagon officials including Defence Secretary Dick Cheney, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell and Under-secretary of State for International Security Affairs Regional Bartholomew.

The army chief also visited the US 24th infantry division headquarters at Fort Stewart, Georgia and McDill Air Base, Florida where he met with US Commander-in-Chief, Central Command General Joseph Hoar.

"The meetings primarily concerned military matters, but the situation in Afghanistan was also discussed," Pakistan ambassador Syeda Abida Husain said.

There was a lot of goodwill on both sides and we had a sense that the US government appreciated Pakistan's role in

Benazir hints at conditional support to Sharif govt

KARACHI, Jan 10: Opposition leader Benazir Bhutto indicated here Thursday that she would support the government if it acted jointly in curtailing powers of the Pakistani President, reports AFP.

Renewing her "bipartisan" appeal, the former premier urged the government to "join hands to end this state of affairs and repeal the 8th constitutional amendment."

The controversial amendment introduced by the late military ruler, Mohammed Zia Ul Haq, gives sweeping powers to the president.