

Espionage ring uncovered in Russia

MOSCOW, Feb 16: The Russian Security Ministry has made a number of arrests after uncovering an espionage ring which passed secrets about security matters to a foreign state, Itar-Tass News Agency said, reports AFP.

The agency did not specify the country involved or how many people were arrested.

Staff at the Russian Ministry of Security... Have uncovered a group of citizens who in 1991 actively gathered secret information and passed it to a foreign state, Itar-Tass said, citing a ministry statement released Saturday.

One of those arrested in the case had access to the information by virtue of his professional duties, the agency added.

Meanwhile Reuters says: The United States has agreed to help identify bones thought to be those of Tsar Nicholas II and his family, assassinated in 1918. State Department officials said on Saturday.

The request for help was put to US Secretary of State James Baker, who visited the site of the assassination. The Tsar and his family were executed after the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917. The bones, including some skeletons, are neatly laid out on a table and numbered at a Russian government forensic institute. They are believed to be those of the Tsar, his wife, three of his five children, maid, cook and family doctor.

The Tsar and his family were killed in the basement of a house in Yekaterinburg and the bodies were moved out of the Urals city.

About 10 years ago, bones, thought to be their remains, were discovered in woods 20 km (12.5 miles) from Yekaterinburg. But they were not exhumed until a year ago, presumably out of fear that it might anger the ruling communists.

The remains of the Tsar's son Alexei and one of his four daughters are missing.

The house where they were killed was torn down in the 1970s when Leonid Brezhnev was Soviet leader.

But a man who espouses the return of the monarchy is at the site almost every day, explaining the history to tourists and handing out black and white pictures of Alexei.



ALGIERS: Residents buy the morning papers on the Martyr's Square, one day after 5 people were killed in an explosion after shootout between police and an armed gang in the Casbah. Head line reads: "Calm in the whole country." -AFP photo

Heavy attack on Tamil targets: 28 Tigers killed

COLOMBO, Feb 16: Heavily armed soldiers launched simultaneous attacks against Tamil guerrilla targets in northeast Sri Lanka today, leaving at least 28 rebels killed, security sources said, reports AFP.

Troops stormed positions of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in three villages in the strategic port district of Trincomalee and killed 13 militants, sources in the area said.

They said there had been similar operations in neighbouring Batticaloa district, where 15 suspected LTTE men were killed. There were no immediate reports of military casualties.

However, the LTTE killed 15 soldiers in an ambush on an army patrol in the same area Friday, prompting a major offensive to find those responsible.

Security forces had been conducting a campaign against the LTTE in the eastern province in the past two weeks.

A military statement issued earlier today said security forces had captured two LTTE bases in the jungles of coastal Batticaloa district but the militants fled as troops advanced to take the hideouts.

Meanwhile, a curfew imposed in the northern Jaffna peninsula, the main stronghold of the LTTE, continued through today and was due to end Tuesday. A military spokesman said there had been no reports of fighting in Jaffna.

The LTTE plan was disclosed when two of its members carrying cyanide were taken into custody in the country's northern province, where the LTTE is fighting to set up an independent state of minority Tamils.

Investigators said that the LTTE plot was apparently aimed at thwarting the imminent military campaign to take over Jaffna, the northern province's capital which is now under LTTE control.

Local press today quoted top defence officials as saying that a killer squad of 10 hardcore LTTE members were assigned for this deadly mission. The targets for the killer squad include secretary to the Defence Ministry, the joint operations commander of government forces, the inspector-general of police and the air force commander.

Iran reactivates military office in London

LONDON, Feb 16: Iran has recently "reactivated" its military procurement office in London despite a continuing arms embargo against it, the Observer newspaper said today, reports AFP.

The Observer said the office reopened after the last British hostages in Lebanon were released last year and was staffed with two-thirds the personnel it had before its closure in 1987.

The British government has not officially approved the office's reopening, the Observer said, but the authorities were aware "that lights are twinkling" in the premises again.

The government ordered the procurement office shut down after Iran's Revolutionary Guards attacked British oil tankers in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war.

PLO attack to affect peace talks: Arens

JERUSALEM, Feb 16: Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Arens indicated on Saturday the attack on an army camp in which three soldiers were killed may affect Arab-Israeli peace talks, reports Reuters. Arens blamed the leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), Yasser Arafat, for the attack.

Along with the probe of strategic aspects of the attack there's no doubt that a diplomatic probe will be made into the role of Yasser Arafat in the peace process while at the same time he deals in terrorism, Arens said on Israel radio.

I think the conclusions that emerge are that we're talking about the organisation of Yasser Arafat, he said.

Three men armed with knives, axes and a pitchfork slipped into an army camp on Saturday and stabbed to death three soldiers.

It was the bloodiest attack on soldiers in an army camp since a Palestinian flew into Israel from Lebanon on a hang-glider in 1987 and killed six.

Arens said the attack was aimed at sabotaging the peace process.

Yeltsin vows to push Israel for concession

TUNIS, Feb 16: Russian President Boris Yeltsin in a letter to PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat Saturday, vowed his country and others would push further to force concessions from Israel, reports AFP.

Russia will pursue its efforts with the United States and the other partners in the peace process.

We have no doubt that the PLO's mainstream Fatah and other organisations are trying to focus their activities around the peace process in an attempt to torpedo the peace process," he said.

The PLO is officially excluded from Arab-Israeli talks launched last October in Madrid, but Palestinian representatives at the talks openly take their cue from Arafat.

The overall head of the Palestinian negotiating team to the talks Faisal Al-Husseini, said the attack was the result of Israel's repressive policies.

The talks, which have failed so far to move past the procedural stage, are scheduled to resume in Washington this month.

Israeli planes raid Palestinian refugee camps

EIN IBRAHIM, Israel, Feb 16: Israeli jets attacked two Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon early Sunday, hours after Arab assailants raided an army camp in Israel and backed to death three soldiers, reports AP.

A brief statement from the Israeli military did not give a reason for the attacks on the Ein El-Hilwe and Rashdiyah camps, but said the targets belonged to Fatah.

Fatah, the mainstream faction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, was accused by Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Arens of mounting the attack on the army camp.

The attackers were Palestinians or Israeli Arabs who attacked as the victims slept in a base near the occupied West Bank, army officials said.

BRIEFLY

Filipino reds raid police station

Suspected Communist rebels exploded three bombs and raided a police station Saturday night in the southern city of Davao, killing three people and injuring 17, police said. AP reports from Baguio.

The attacks began soon after sunset in Davao, the country's third largest city which is 960 kilometers (610 miles) southeast of Manila.

A bomb exploded in a passenger jeep, killing two people and injuring 17 others, police said. Bombs exploded soon afterward at a bus station and the public market. Six suspected New People's Army guerrillas also raided a police station on the outskirts of Davao, killing a policeman, police said.

Police blamed Communist rebels of the New People's Army for all the attacks.

Afghan refugee kills 8 in Pakistan: An Afghan refugee went berserk and shot dead eight people before he was killed by villagers near the north-western Pakistani town of Peshawar, police said on Saturday, reports Reuters.

They said the massacre took place on Friday at the nearby village of Palosay.

The Afghan, Jan Agha, earlier shot and killed a brother-in-law and his wife as well as wounding his own spouse on Tuesday, police said.

Agha hung a copy of the Quran around his neck when he went on the killing spree on Friday, police added. Later village residents surrounded him and shot him.

Colombian peace talks from Feb 24: Colombian government officials said on Saturday that peace talks with Marxist rebels would resume in neighbouring Venezuela on February 24, local RCN radio reported, says Reuters from Bogota.

The government and rebel negotiators had planned to resume talks two weeks ago, but a failed military coup in Caracas on February 4 pushed back the starting date.

In recent days Colombian press reports have speculated that the current round of talks would begin in the capital of Venezuela and then move to either Mexico or Ecuador.

One more killed in Punjab blast: Suspected Sikh militants hurled a powerful bomb into a politician's home in India's Punjab state on Saturday, killing one person and injuring at least 20 others, police said, reports Reuters from Ludhiana.

R K Bedi, the top police officer in Ludhiana, one of the largest cities in Punjab, said six women and 14 men were taken to hospital with shrapnel injuries. At least one person was declared dead on arrival, he said.

A large crowd of political activists had gathered in the home of Harnam Das Johar, a candidate for the February 19 elections to Punjab's state assembly, at the time of the attack, Bedi said.

Johar, member of the Congress Party which rules in Delhi, was not at home at the time of the attack.

Rains pound Los Angeles: Torrential rains with winds of 20 mph (32 kph) pounded Los Angeles on Saturday in the third big storm to hit this week, forcing people to evacuate their homes, causing scattered mud slides and blocking highways, Reuters reports from Los Angeles.

Seven people were killed and four are missing in the first two storms which caused some of the worst flooding in the city and surrounding areas this century. California Governor Pete Wilson estimated damage caused by the first two storms at 23 million dollars.

In Northern California, hundreds of cars, many filled with people planning to spend a holiday week-end in mountain resorts, were trapped overnight when a building snowstorm closed the main freeway connecting the state to Northern Nevada. Snowplough reopened the road on Saturday morning.

The storms have come in the sixth year of a drought, with people still forced to restrict the use of their water supply for showers.

Haley's funeral

MEMPHIS (Tenn), Feb 16: Renowned black writer Alex Haley, who wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "Roots", was mourned Saturday at a funeral service in his childhood home near here, reports AP.

Haley died last Monday of a heart attack at age 70.

Some 1,600 people packed a two-hour service at Greenwood Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, where Haley's wife Myran eulogized her husband for having "the ability to take the most mundane subject and turn it into magic."

"Thank you, Alex, you have helped us to know who we truly are," she said.

Burial was to follow the service. In his eulogy, George W. Haley spoke about some of the characters from his brother's celebrated novel.

Cory orders military cadets to stay neutral in polls

BAGUIO, Philippines, Feb 16: President Corazon Aquino ordered graduating military cadets Sunday to stay neutral in the May 11 elections during commencement exercises attended by candidates she has personally endorsed, reports AP.

Meanwhile, Communist insurgents threatened to attack politicians "with established machineries for the purpose of fraud and terrorism." Earlier, suspected Communist rebels exploded three bombs and raided a police station in the southern city of Davao, killing three and injuring 17.

During commencement ceremonies here at the Philippine Military Academy, Aquino told the 198 graduates that they face "an important

test of your commitment to democracy" in the forthcoming elections.

"I reiterate my instructions to you all in the (military) to remain neutral as you ensure honest, orderly and peaceful elections," she said. "I will brook no disobedience. I remind you too of your solemn duty in the smooth transfer of power on June 30, 1992," when Aquino leaves office.

Despite the appeal for neutrality, banners supporting Mrs. Aquino's personal favorite, former Defense Secretary Fidel Ramos, could be seen along the road leading to the academy, located on the outskirts of Baguio about 210 kilometers (130 miles) north of Manila.

Ramos, his vice presidential

running mate, Cebu Gov. Emilio Osmena, and their 24 Senate candidates, also attended the graduation. Ramos and Osmena shook hands with graduating cadets as they left the podium after receiving diplomas from Aquino.

Academy sources said Ramos, a West Point graduate and former military chief of staff, had asked to be allowed on the podium with Mrs. Aquino. But the graduating cadets turned down the request because Ramos is a presidential candidate.

Although Ramos was a career soldier, he is a controversial figure within the 150,000-member Armed Forces of the Philippines. Critics accused him of practicing favoritism in promotions and of other irreg-

ularities, which the Aquino government promised to eradicate.

Aquino took office in the 1986 uprising which toppled the late President Ferdinand Marcos. Ramos, a cousin of Marcos, helped lead the uprising and then supported Mrs. Aquino against armed challenges from military dissidents.

Significant numbers of Philippine Military Academy cadets supported coup attempts in August 1987 and in December 1989.

The attacks Saturday night in Davao, the country's third largest city 960 kilometers (610 miles) southeast of Manila, began soon after sunset when a bomb exploded in a

passenger jeep, killing two people and injuring 17 others.

Police blamed Communist rebels for all the attacks.

War of widows

AFP reports: Former First Lady Imelda Marcos expects a "War of the widows" with President Corazon Aquino who she claims will enter the Philippine presidential race in place of her preferred candidate Fidel Ramos.

"I think it's going to happen," the widow of deposed dictator Ferdinand Marcos said in a written statement, adding that Aquino would throw her hat into the ring because former Defence Secretary Ramos is a "weak contender."

Aquino has ruled out seeking a new six-year term, but

North Korea's N-issue still clouds reconciliation

SEOUL, Feb 16: North and South Korea will officially proclaim the start of new relations when their prime ministers resume talks this week, reports Reuters.

But the contentious issue of the North's nuclear programme still clouds reconciliation on a Peninsula riven by decades of enmity.

South Korean Prime Minister Chung Won-Shik, heading a 40-member delegation and accompanied by 50 reporters, is due to cross the heavily-fortified border on Tuesday for a four-day North-horn visit.

In the Northern capital Pyongyang on Wednesday, Chung and his Northern coun-

terpart Yon Hyoung-Muk are scheduled to exchange signed documents, putting into practice a non-aggression and reconciliation pact as well as an accord banning nuclear weapons from the Peninsula.

But South Korean officials have been quick to caution against hope of smooth implementation of the accords, saying the North has yet to dispel international concern that it is secretly developing atomic weapons.

"It is both meaningful and important that the accords become effective. But clear and visible results depend on the North's attitude towards the nuclear issue," a senior gov-

ernment official said on Sunday.

"Our side will strongly urge the North to ratify its nuclear safeguards accord as early as possible and allow inspectors access to its nuclear sites," the official said.

The North last month signed the safeguards accord with the International Atomic Energy Agency. But doubts remain about whether inspections will be permitted soon.

"Since the signing, North Koreans have refused to give us any timetable for inspections. This is deepening our worries," the official said.

Fighting still continues in Mogadishu

NAIROBI, Feb 16: Fighting continued in Somalia's capital Mogadishu today after a night of fierce artillery and mortar battles which apparently indicated that a United Nations-brokered truce had never been effective, reports AFP.

There was heavy shelling all night, especially around four or five this morning, a Nairobi-based relief official in contact with Mogadishu by radio said. "It's a bit calmer this morning, but there are still rumbles," the official said.

Representatives of Mogadishu's main two clan-based warring factions agreed at UN-mediated talks in New York on Friday to stop fighting immediately and to sign a formal ceasefire later this month.

Princess Diana visits Teresa homes

CALCUTTA, Feb 16: Mother Teresa's nuns welcomed Britain's Princess Diana into some of the world's poorest slums on Saturday despite worries about the health of the 81-year-old missionary, reports Reuters.

Mother Teresa had to cancel plans to give the Princess a personal introduction to her homes for abandoned children and the dying in Calcutta when doctors ordered her to remain under medical care at the Vatican, nuns said.

Mother Teresa, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, was able to telephone a message for her sisters in Calcutta to inscribe on a greetings card presented to the Princess, who went ahead with a scheduled visit which often visibly moved her.

"Be one heart full of love, in the heart of Jesus through Mary. God bless you," said the message.

The Princess, ending a six-day visit to India, brushed away tears as the nuns sang to welcome her, then spent nearly three hours talking to children and elderly men brought from the city streets into the mission's care.

Waves of refugees from famine, disaster and war in the region have swamped Calcutta over the past few decades.

The Princess cradled children whose families had been driven to abandon them, and fed sweets to an elderly man whom residents had brought in after they found him dying on a pavement.

Earlier the Princess visited a leprosy hospital, patting the foot of a 12-year-old girl whose toes had been amputated.

13 Indonesians drowned in boat capsized

KOTA KINABALU, Malaysia, Feb 16: Thirteen Indonesians were drowned after their boat capsized in rough waters off Malaysia's Sabah state on Borneo island, police said today, reports Reuters.



CALCUTTA: The Princess of Wales, talks with a patient at the mission of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. -AFP photo

Off the Record

Better gift than greeting cards

NORTH PLATTE: Roger Brackett got a better gift than greeting cards and candy on Valentine's Day. His gift was a son, and Brackett helped deliver him on the living-room floor, reports AP.

Brackett's girlfriend, Patricia Craghead, woke him up early Friday and asked if he was ready to have a baby. Half asleep, Brackett prepared to go to the hospital, but Craghead's contractions quickened to just seconds apart.

They called 911 and police dispatcher Dee Fraser talked Brackett through delivering Ryan, a healthy, 8-pound, 8-ounce boy 26 minutes later.

Participating in his son's birth was "the best and worst experience of my entire life", Brackett said.

'King of the Sanwis' for Jackson

KRINJABO, Ivory Coast: Michael Jackson, touring Africa to make a film, was crowned "King of the Sanwis" on a golden throne Saturday in an Ivory Coast village, reports AP.

Four young, bare-breasted women fanned Jackson, who wore an orange shirt and black pants and donned a traditional yellow-orange beret during the ceremony.

Kings and chiefs from nearby villages joined Krinjabo villagers in celebrating Jackson's honorary enthronement. Elders chanted incantations as they poured gin on the dry ground to honor the memory of the village's ancestors.

Jackson said, "thank you," after accepting his crown and a long golden chain.

The singer is on a tour of Africa to make a film called Return to Africa.

First couturier to get Academie Beaux-Arts

PARIS: Pierre Cardin on Wednesday became the first couturier to be elected to the Academie des Beaux-Arts, one of five sections of the French Institute, reports AP.

The 69-year-old French designer took the place left vacant by the death of actor Pierre Dux.

Cardin, who founded his fashion house in 1949, received the Legion d'honneur in 1974. He holds numerous awards for his design work, which has touched everything from men's and women's fashion to housewares.

The French Institute honors lifelong achievement in various domains, including science, medicine and the arts.

\$12,100 hat

NEW YORK: A collector who earlier paid 220,000 dollar for the gun Jack Ruby used to kill Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald spent another 13,420 dollar of the hat and shoes Ruby wore that day, reports AP.

The gray hat with a black band was seen by millions of TV viewers when Ruby rushed from a crowd on November 24, 1963, and shot Oswald.

"Jack Ruby" is imprinted on the inner hat band. The hat fetched 12,100 dollar Thursday night from the anonymous New Jersey collector who bought the gun at auction in December, said Herman Darvick, who ran the auction. The collector paid dlr 1,320 for the shoes.

Baker holds talks with Uzbek President

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan, Feb 16: U.S. Secretary of State James Baker held talks on Saturday with hardline Uzbek President Islam Karimov, the central Asian leader most likely to resist pressure for economic and political reforms, reports Reuters.

Baker, on a tour of predominantly Muslim former Soviet republics, is trying to draw the newly-independent states closer to the west and dilute the influence which fundamentalist Iran hopes to exercise in the region.

His trip aims to lay the groundwork for formal U.S. recognition of the republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan.