

Pan Am bombing

Suspects deny involvement

LONDON, Feb 18: Two Libyans wanted by the west to stand trial for blowing up an American airliner denied involvement in the 1988 bombing over Scotland, a British newspaper said today, reports Reuter.

Abdel Baset Ali Mohamed al-Megrahi, 39, and Al-Amin Khalifa Fhimah, 35, told the Daily Mail they were not to blame for the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over the town of Lockerbie in which 270 people died.

Al-Megrahi was quoted as saying in an interview: "I am not guilty. The days will prove that."

He added: "I want to send this message to the British people, the American people and the international community. One day I will be found not guilty."

"I am sorry for the people of Lockerbie and one day you will see that."

Fhimah was asked if he had planned the bomb aboard the jumbo jet. He replied: "Never ever."

He added: "I don't know why my name has been chosen. Where in my history am I a danger man? am I normal person brought up in a normal family."

Legal sources in Tripoli said the two men would be questioned on Tuesday by a magistrate in private — not at a public hearing as had been expected.

They would be shown to reporters to prove they were neither missing nor dead, as suggested by Western Press reports.

British and American judicial authorities say the two men used their jobs with Libya's state airline as a cover for activities carried out as members of the country's intelligence service.

EC call

AFP from Lisbon reports: The European Community (EC) renewed a call to Libya Monday to hand over suspected terrorists wanted for bombings of two civilian aircraft in 1989 and 1990 which killed 440 people.

EC Foreign Ministers issued a statement after a meeting in Lisbon welcoming a UN resolution on January 21 which urged Libya to cooperate with British, French and US investigations into the bombings.



UKRAINE: A young naval cadet swears his oath of allegiance during a ceremony at a military school in Kiev, as a bust of Lenin looks on. The formation of Ukraine's own military forces started at the end of last year but they have kept much of the old Soviet regalia. — AFP photo.

US, Russia to help dismantle N-arms

MOSCOW, Feb 18: The United States and Russia have agreed on a series of measures to help the former Soviet republic dismantle its nuclear weapons. They plan to discuss further nuclear weapons reduction Tuesday, reports AP.

Baker promised \$25 million for a center to help former Soviet nuclear scientists, and agreed to provide an array of equipment and facilities to help Russia store and destroy its nuclear weapons.

He was unable to reach agreement Monday with Russian President Boris Yeltsin on further cuts of long-range nuclear weapons, but will address specific cuts Tuesday at a meeting with Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev.

"Unfortunately, we have some differences," Yeltsin said. He said these involve disagreement about how certain warheads are counted on multiple-warhead weapons including land — and submarine-based missiles. That issue has dogged US-Soviet arms control talks for the last decade.

Yeltsin said aides on both sides had instructions to bridge the gap so that an announcement can be made by himself and President Bush at a July summit in Washington.

Bush last month proposed cutting the US long-range nuclear arsenal to 4,700 warheads — a 60 per cent cut from its current force — and to about 4,500 for Russia — also an estimated 60 per cent less than it now has.

Yeltsin, however, wants each side to have 2,500 warheads.

Bush is willing to consider further cuts, but is balking at a Russian demand to reduce to one the multiple warheads on submarine-launched nuclear missiles — an area in which the United States has a distinct advantage.

Baker will report to Bush on his talks with Kozyrev later this week. He returns to Washington later Tuesday.

Baker will also bring Bush an appeal from Yeltsin for an additional \$600 million in credit guarantees so his country can buy grain, from the United States.

Arab League condemns Israeli action

CAIRO, Feb 18: The Arab League (AL) yesterday condemned Israel's attacks on South Lebanon over the past two days and warned against Israel's further action to undermine the Middle East peace process, reports Xinhua.

An AL Secretariat statement said Israel's raids, which killed civilians including women and children, aimed at thwarting the efforts of the Arab countries to achieve a comprehensive peace in the region.

Off the Record

It is minister's flower

WELLINGTON: A poet who picked a flower from a minister's garden and put it in his hair was fined by a court Tuesday for international damage, reports AFP.

Tony Martyn Greer, 23, denied the charge when he appeared before Ashburton District Court Judge Ian Hay.

Wellfare Minister Jenny Shipley's 13-year-old son Benjamin told the court a group of protesters arrived at the family home in December. He said he saw Greer put a purple flower in his hair.

Greer said he picked the flower but being prosecuted for international damage was a pretty silly thing. He was fined 150 dollar (\$1 US).

We would go naked than wear fur

TOKYO: Two American animal rights activists stripped down to their underwear and paraded through a busy Tokyo shopping district of Tuesday wearing placards saying: "we'd rather go naked than wear fur", reports Reuter.

The two Americans, accompanied by a handful of Japanese supporters, timed their demonstration to coincide with an international fur trade show featuring hundreds of fur companies, including 23 from the United States.

"The US fur trade has been left devastated so they are looking to Asia because there is not an active animal-protection movement here," said Dan Mathews, a member of the US-based People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

"We didn't come to preach to Japan, we came to balance out the 23 American companies trying to sell fur," he said.

Mathews and fellow Peta demonstrator, Julia Sloane, marched through Tokyo's Ikebukuro district with their slogan written in Japanese and English on banners held strategically in front of and behind them. The demonstration drew swarms of curious onlookers and a few policemen, but no arrests were made.

"By showing some of our skin, we hope to save some animal skins," Mathews said.

Ruble without Lenin?

MOSCOW: Vladimir Lenin's picture will be removed from the ruble, the Russian Central Bank announced Tuesday, but no decision has been made on who will replace him, reports AP.

Bank chairman Georgy Matyukhin said ruble notes bearing Lenin's profile will be withdrawn from circulation as they wear out and replaced with new bills.

"As for the portrait, we have not yet designed the new one," Matyukhin told Russian television.

Lenin now graces all bills higher than the 10-ruble note, but not the smaller, one-, two-, three- and five-ruble notes.

Removing his picture from the Russian currency is the latest blow to the once revered image of the founder of the Soviet State. Statues of Lenin were toppled throughout the Soviet Union after the August failed coup and his name has been stripped off everything from schools and streets to Russia's largest library.

Matyukhin stressed the Russian Central Bank was not planning any monetary reform, scotching repeated rumors the ruble will be scrapped or devalued.

He predicted, however, that the ruble would continue to strengthen against the US dollar. One dollar now fetches 110 rubles, but Matyukhin said the rate will soon be 50 rubles to the dollar. Even so, the government would like to see an exchange rate of 20-25 rubles, he said.

'Cool As Ice' speaks for all 'worst'

LOS ANGELES: Vanilla Ice's "Cool As Ice" scooped up seven Golden Raspberry Awards nominations Monday and Sean Young got two bids for playing twins badly as Hollywood prepared to saute the worst of 1991, reports AP.

Bruce Willis' "Hudson Hawk" and Dan Aykroyd's "Nothing But Trouble" both picked up six nominations for the Oscar-spoofing Razzie trophy, a golf ball-sized gold-painted Raspberry with an estimated value of \$1.79.

The Razzie nominations come just two days before Wednesday's announcement of the Academy Award Contenders.

72-hr curfew in Jaffna Peninsula lapses

COLOMBO, Feb 18: A 72-hour curfew in the Tamil rebel stronghold of Jaffna Peninsula lapsed Tuesday, while the military said 10 Tiger rebels, including four women guerrillas, were killed in the north, reports AP.

The curfew, imposed last Saturday, caused widespread speculation of an impending government offensive against Tiger rebels. It ended at 6 a.m. (0030 GMT) Tuesday without a major attack, officials said.

Jaffna, linked to the mainland by a thin strip of land, is 300 kilometers (185 miles) north of Colombo.

Six Tiger rebels were fatally shot Tuesday by government troops near the village of Iddakkadu in Jaffna district, said officials at the military headquarters in Colombo.

On Monday, helicopter-borne troops fired machine guns at a camp of women guerrillas, killing three. One rebel committed suicide by consuming a cyanide capsule, officials said.

Ten women were injured in the helicopter attack in the village of Irampalkulam in the northern Vavuniya district, said the officials who cannot be quoted under briefing rules.

Also Monday, troops fired artillery shells from several military camps in the Jaffna Peninsula, according to military sources in the north. There were no immediate reports of casualties. Officials in Colombo said they were unaware of the firing.

More than 8,000 people have been killed since June 1990, when rebels from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam broke a 13-month ceasefire and resumed their violent campaign for an independent homeland in the north and the east.

Tamils, mostly Hindus, are 18 per cent of Sri Lanka's 17 million people. Many of them complain of economic and cultural discrimination by the Buddhist-majority Sinhalese.

Home affairs adviser removed Direct rule over Sind likely

KARACHI, Feb 18: Pakistan's rulers are searching for a new leader for the lawless province of Sind to replace ailing Chief Minister Jam Sadiq Ali, parliamentary sources said, reports Reuter.

But they said emissaries from the federal government in Islamabad may also be considering imposing direct rule over Sind through a non-political governor for a limited period to try to calm the situation. This could also lead to a compromise with Bhutto, they said.

Lawyers are divided on the best way out of the crisis.

"The problem in Sind is very, very serious," former Sind High Court Judge Fakhruddin G Ebrahim, a former government of the province, said.

"We need a strong government for at least a six-month breathing period without dissolution or suspension of the Sind assembly."

Other lawyers said the assembly had to be dissolved or suspended before "governor's rule" was imposed.

Irfanullah Marwat

Meanwhile, Xinhua said: The Sind provincial government in South Pakistan has removed Irfanullah Marwat, the alleged most controversial figure in the province, from the office of the Home Affairs adviser to the Chief Minister with immediate effect.

According to local press reports today quoting official sources, Irfanullah Marwat has been replaced by Syed Muzaffar Hussain Shah who is also holding the portfolio of Law and Parliamentary Affairs in the Sind provincial cabinet.

However Irfanullah Marwat was given the influential portfolio of adviser on services and general administration to the Chief Minister of the province, the reports said.

The removal of Irfanullah Marwat, son-in-law of President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, along with Chief Minister Jam Sadiq Ali has long been a demand of the opposition Pakistan People's Party which alleged the Sind government has been following a policy of victimizing the political opponents.

The changes in the Sind provincial government were reported to have been brought in under the instructions of the federal government which is trying to bring stability in the ethnically-torn province in the wake of the deteriorating health condition of Chief Minister Jam Sadiq Ali.

BRIEFLY

Falklands war hero dead: Lord Fieldhouse, who led the British fleet to victory in the Falklands war, died Monday in south aged 63, the Ministry of Defence announced, reports AP from London.

Admiral John Fieldhouse led the task force sent to reconquer the Falklands from Argentine troops who had occupied them early in 1982. He organized the invasion and reconquest of South Georgia island in April of that year.

He was made a peer after the war ended.

Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister at the time of the conflict, said she was "very distressed" at the news of his death.

Canada, Kyrgyzstan set up ties: Canada established diplomatic relations with Kyrgyzstan on Monday and announced a further 1.68 million dollars in aid to former Soviet states, reports Reuter from Ottawa.

Ties between the two countries were formalised during a four-day visit to Canada by Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev.

"Kyrgyzstan has shown itself to be a democratic and moderate voice of stability in the new post-USSR era," said Canadian External Affairs Minister Barbara McDougall.

Canada recognised the independence of the central Asian state of 4.5 million inhabitants on December 25.

11 quakes shake Filipino island: Eleven tremors shook a volcanic island south of Manila within 24 hours but the building of the ground formation appears to have ended, scientists said Tuesday, reports AP from Manila.

The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said the temperature of the water in the main crater of the Taal volcano remains high, raising fears of a new eruption.

Officials urged residents of Taal, a volcanic complex on an island 56 kilometres (35 miles) south of Manila, to evacuate.

Fears of a new eruption increased after the island shook violently last Friday in a series of earthquakes. Steaming fissures also appeared on the slopes of the main crater, which erupted in 1911 and killed nearly 2,000 people.

7 killed in plane crash: Five Mexicans on a skiing trip and the pilot and co-pilot were killed when their twin-engine plane crashed in heavy fog in the San Bernardino mountains of southern California, police said on Monday, reports Reuter.

A civil air patrol spotted the tail of the Piper Cheyenne aircraft sticking out of snow at the 7,000-foot (2,100 metres) level of the mountains near big bear lake on Monday after the plane had been reported missing on Sunday afternoon, a police spokesman said.

Rescuers, who reached the wreckage, reported there were no survivors, he said.

The pilot of the plane had asked for weather information on Sunday afternoon about an hour after taking off from brown field in San Diego. Nothing further was heard from the aircraft, he said.

3 blacks gunned down: Three black men were gunned down by unknown attackers before being thrown off a commuter train east of Johannesburg on Monday night, police said, reports AFP.

A police spokesman said the attack, in which another man was seriously wounded, took place near Kathlehong black township.

More than 100 people have been killed in politically-motivated attacks on trains since violence broke out in August 1990, with 12 people killed last month alone.

The latest deaths came despite a national peace accord signed last September by the White-minority government, Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) and the conservative Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party.

Ukraine takes control of a Soviet air force division

KIEV, Ukraine, Feb 18: Ukraine took control of a Soviet air force division on Monday, three days after a group of pilots "defected" to Russia to keep their bombers out of Ukrainian hands, Tass reported, says AP.

The news agency said the long-range aviation division, based in Uzhin near the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, was "the first one in the strategic forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States to withdraw from subordination of the central command."

Ukrainian Defence Ministry spokesman Alexander Kluban said he could not confirm the report, and a duty officer at the former Soviet Defence Ministry said he had no information about it.

If the report is true and the division includes long-range nuclear bombers, it would represent a violation of repeated promises by Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk and other Commonwealth leaders to keep all strategic forces under a central command.

The move also could raise tensions between Ukraine and Russia, which have been vying for portions of the former Soviet military, particularly the Black Sea fleet.

Ukraine and three other republics: Moldova, Azerbaijan and Belarus — refused last week to form a united convention must guarantee peace," said the 44-year-old president, reiterating his support for a UN-brokered plan aimed at installing a neutral transitional government that could oversee nationwide elections.

During a lengthy interview with The Association Press, Najibullah invoked West's worst nightmare about the dangers of Islamic extremism.

He suggested Afghanistan would become "a center for world terrorism" if the more intransigent guerrilla groups that oppose his Communist-style government are allowed to subvert the UN peace process.

Some Afghan guerrilla groups in southern and eastern Afghanistan have been funded heavily throughout the war by Arab governments and wealthy individuals with radical religious views. Young Arab volunteers often join Afghan guerrillas to do their part for the Islamic Jihad, or holy war.

"Some of the militants in the Algerian fundamentalist movement have already proclaimed they were trained in the Afghan war," he told the AP.

'Kabul bulwark against fundamentalism'

KABUL, Feb 18: President Najibullah on Tuesday portrayed his government as a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism and narcotics trafficking, reports AP.

He also suggested only he could guarantee the country's security and its orderly transition to a democratic government after 13 years of war with the Muslim guerrillas, known as Mujahedeen, or Islamic holy warriors.

"The question is whether we are seeking merely a settlement or peace. Any settlement must guarantee peace," said the 44-year-old president, reiterating his support for a UN-brokered plan aimed at installing a neutral transitional government that could oversee nationwide elections.

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15 more killed in Nagorny-Karabakh fighting

LONDON, Feb 18: Fighting raged today in the disputed enclave of Nagorny-Karabakh, with at least 15 people killed during intense shelling of the territory's capital Stepanakert, according to Radio Russia monitored by the BBC, reports AFP.

The radio said 15 people were killed and several dozens more wounded in a 24-hour artillery bombardment of Stepanakert.

Over 300 shells hit the city, causing extensive damage, it said. An entire block of residential buildings was destroyed.

The number of casualties was expected to rise as corpses were still being dug out from the debris, the radio said.

Last Friday, six pilots from a division based in the Western Ukrainian town of Starokostiantyniv flew their Sukhoi bombers to the neighbouring republics of Belarus after refusing to pledge allegiance to Ukraine.

The airmen later went to Russia, according to Tass.



BUDAPEST: With tender loving care a zoo keeper strokes the forehead of 2 month old Crangutan Toni at the Budapest zoo. Toni was having his first outing and with the temperatures near freezing he was well wrapped in a baby's hooded jacket. —AFP photo

Wallet returns without cash

TRENTON, NJ: A wallet that belonged to first US President George Washington, stolen from a museum last month, was returned for the anniversary of his birth Monday but the cash it contained was missing, reports AP.

Eric Davis, a lawyer who said he was acting on behalf of a "good Samaritan who requests anonymity," turned the wallet over to state police. Two bills issued by the Continental Congress — a two-thirds dollar bill from 1776 and a dollar bill from 1779 — were still missing.

Davis and state police spokesman John Hagerty refused to give details about how Davis' client got the wallet because an investigation was continuing, Davis said his client didn't steal it.

The 10-inch-long, 6-inch-wide (24.5-centimeter-long, 15-centimeter-wide) wallet, with "GW 1775" printed on a brass clasp, was on loan to the Old Barracks Museum from a private collection. It was taken January 28 from a Plexiglass display case.

"We were very distressed when we discovered it was gone," said museum director Cynthia Koch. "We're delighted it's back."

Mobutu faces world pressure for political reform

KINSHASA, Feb 18: Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko faced fresh world pressure for political reform today after troops mowed down at least 17 marchers at a peaceful demonstration for democracy, reports Reuter.

US Ambassador Melissa Wells, Belgian Ambassador Jean Coene and French Charge d'Affaires Dominique Pin Mobutu on his luxury yacht just outside Kinshasa on Monday and demanded he convene a suspended national pro-democracy conference.

There was an international outcry when soldiers opened fire on thousands of Christian marchers on Sunday demanding the conference restart.

Information Minister Kitegeye Yezu told Reuters the final official death toll in one of the bloodiest days in months of anti-Mobutu protest was 17. Zairean opposition sources in neighbouring Congo said as many as 42 were killed.

Witnesses said many of the demonstrators were clutching Bibles and Orsaries. One of the dead was a seven-year-old boy.

Kitegeye said the march's organisers were to blame for starting an unlawful, provocative assembly.

The bloodbath gave new urgency to the western envoys' encounter with Mobutu, delayed last week while the President was out of Kinshasa.

A joint embassy statement, read to Reuters by a Belgian diplomat, said the meeting was held "with the aim of expressing to president Mobutu... suggestions relating to the re-launch of the democratisation process."

The statement said the envoys had a separate meeting with the President of the national conference, Roman catholic archbishop Monseigneur Pasiya.

Prime Minister Nguzu Karl-Bond suspended the chaotic forum on January 19 saying its stormy sessions were causing tribal tension in the huge central African nation.

The US State Department condemned Sunday's killings and said the army crackdown was unjustified.

France called it "brutal and murderous repression".

Belgian Foreign Minister Mark Eyskens said: "It strengthens our conviction that they need radical changes in this country... otherwise there will soon be a catastrophe."

Zaire has been crumbling into economic and political chaos for months, a process speeded by army-led looting last September in Kinshasa and several other cities.

Western powers have made little secret of wanting Mobutu out since the end of the Cold War cut Zaire's importance to the West as a strategic ally in Africa.

But Mobutu, who has kept an iron grip on Zaire throughout his 27 years in power, has a reputation for weathering similar storms. His control of the army is solid and he is skilled at manipulating political opponents to maintain his position.

He appointed Nguzu, formerly one of his loudest critics, as Prime Minister late last year in a shrewd stroke which split the opposition.

Herman Cohen, US Assistant Secretary of state for Africa, warned earlier this month there could be worse chaos if he were forced from power too quickly.

"If Mobutu with his control of the security apparatus... does not support a transition process then it cannot succeed," he told a senate subcommittee in Washington.