

Myanmar dissidents seek Indian help

GAUHATI (India), Feb 23: Myanmar dissidents have sought military, financial and moral support from India for the restoration of democracy in their military-controlled country, an exiled spokesman for a students' group said Saturday, reports AP.

The All-Burma Federation of Students has written to Parliament members in India exhorting them not to recognize the military dictatorship of Gen Saw Maung, said the spokesman who requested anonymity.

India has refused to grant political asylum to Myanmar dissidents but has given them refuge status.

The spokesman said Myanmar was becoming a "Chinese satellite" and had recently received some helicopter gunships from Beijing to crush anti-Yangon insurgents.

The students' group plans to open an office in New Delhi of exiled National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma. This would help intensify its offensive against the military regime in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar, he said.

The New Delhi office will be headed by Tint Swe, a Member of Parliament who won the 1990 national elections but now lives in exile in the north-eastern Indian state of Mizoram.

AFP from Manila says Philippine President Corason Aquino yesterday asked Myanmar ruling military junta to allow the immediate family of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to visit her at home, where she is held under arrest.

I am aware that Madame Suu Kyi continues to be in detention, Aquino said in a letter to General Saw Maung, the chairman of the Myanmar's governing State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

House arrest is a particularly painful experience when the detainee is not afforded an opportunity of personally seeing and talking to immediate members of her family, Aquino added.

High-ranking arrested Kashmiris being shifted to safe houses

Delhi plans talks with JKLF

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: New Delhi has transferred high-ranking Kashmiris captured in an anti-separatist drive from remote to more central safe houses in a move possibly linked to eventual talks, sources here said today, reports AFP.

The Indian Express newspaper said among those shifted were Yassen Malik, the 26-year-old Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) leader who had been brought to Delhi from Agra, where he had been in solitary confinement for almost two years.

Three others, Abdul Ghani Lone of the people's conference, Moulvi Abbas Ansari of the Muslim United Front and Professor Abdul Ghani of the Muslim conference, had been transferred to Jammu from Mehrauli, the Express said.

All three had been active in above ground parties, unlike the JKLF which is banned, but were arrested under the preventive Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act (TADA) and kept in safe houses, the sources said.

No further details of the moves were immediately available, but there has been speculation here, fuelled by statements from members of the ruling Congress(I). That Delhi might be moving towards talks with the JKLF.

The JKLF, unlike most other separatist movements in Muslim-majority Kashmir state, favours independence rather than union with neighbouring Pakistan, which disputes Kashmir.

India and Pakistan, which both hold parts of the frontier region, have fought to wars over the former princely state, and tension has been heightened by an abortive attempt earlier this month by the JKLF on the Pakistan side to march into India.

PTI adds: The Pakistan government will be sending special envoys in the near future to the members of the United Nations Security Council and other leading members of the international community for finding a peaceful settlement of the Kashmir issue, the Pakistan Secretary General of Foreign Affairs has said.

Zaki said that the Pakistan Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif was having a "constructive dialogue" with the Indian government on the Kashmir issue

and the Prime Ministers of the two countries have had meetings at Male, Colombo and in Davos in Switzerland.

Speaking at the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs in Karachi on "recent developments in foreign policy of Pakistan," Zaki said that Pakistan was determined to pursue a peaceful political settlement of the Afghan problem.

There was broad consensus among all groups of Afghan Mujahideens that the participation of the Afghan President, Dr Najibullah was not acceptable in the intra-Afghan dialogue and this point of view was accepted by the UN Secretary General in October last year in the report to the UN General assembly and in the Moscow declaration, Zaki said.

Off the Record

Only to control media coverage

NEW YORK: A made photo of Arnold Schwarzenegger appears in the March issue of Spy magazine, despite — or perhaps because of a complaint from the actor's publicist, reports AP.

The satirical magazine received an unsolicited print of the photo, made in a studio in the 1970s, while it was preparing a story on Schwarzenegger's attempts to control media coverage of himself, said publisher Kurt Andersen.

Andersen said Thursday the magazine decided to print the photo as a result of a call from Schwarzenegger's publicist, Charlotte Parker.

He said Parker called a day after Spy received the photo to complain about the magazine having it and to wonder why the magazine was doing a story on Schwarzenegger without involving her.

"We'd rattled her cage and that became part of the story. So we decided to print it," Andersen said. "It's a press manipulation story."

Paintings made him multimillionaire

NEW YORK, Feb 23: Artist Chen Yifei left China with 38 dollar, his brushes and memories of persecution. In a dozen years, his paintings have become a favourite of collectors and made him a multimillionaire, reports AP.

"This is America. I couldn't have done this in China. Here you can choose; success depends on your character," says Chen, 45, speaking in a heavily accented English. "My art is a bridge between East and West. Some people call it romantic realism."

His richly hued human figures include hundreds of portraits of Western musicians and technically near-perfect images of native Chinese musicians.

But Chen's painted China also has memories of torment, as in the weather-beaten bodies of struggling Tibetan farmers, their faces twisted by life.

Chinese beauty, he notes during an interview in his upper east side studio, is "a little different. It's more melancholy, quieter than that of the West."

He arrived at Kennedy International Airport one midnight in September 1980. He spoke no English, "and I was a little nervous, because I heard New York was dangerous."

Last September in Hong Kong, Christie's auctioned his "Lingering Melodies from the Xuyang River" for 1.76.282 dollar a world record price for a Chinese oil painting at auction. The work is a scene from ancient Chinese folklore, in which the music of three phantom women soothes a depressed man.

Among collectors who own a Chen work is former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Prices now range from about \$15,000 to \$80,000.

Paula 'forever' Estevez's 'girl'

LOS ANGELES: Pop singer Paula Abdul and actor Emilio Estevez recently became engaged, a spokesman said Thursday, reports AP.

"We are completely in love and happy to have found each other," the pair said in a statement released through the singer's publicist, Elliot Sekuler.

No date has been set for their marriage. It will be the first for both.

Miss Abdul, 29, has been on tour following the release of her "Spellbound" album, featuring the hit singles "Blowing Kisses in the Wind," "Rush Rush" and "Vibology." Her previous album was the popular "Forever Your Girl."

Estevez, 29, son of actor Martin Sheen, currently is starring in the feature film "Freejack." His previous credits include "The Breakfast Club," "St. Elmo's Fire," "Repo Man" and the "Young Guns" movies.

Estevez last year bought a multimillion-dollar home on Malibu's Broad Beach.

'Iraq still a military threat to Kuwait'

KUWAIT CITY, Feb 23: In a speech marking the first anniversary of the liberation of Kuwait, the emirate's ruler said Saturday that Iraq remains a military threat, reports AP.

The speech came four days before the Feb 26 anniversary. At least 60 per cent of the country's citizens are expected to leave by Monday for foreign vacations during a five-day holiday commemorating the end of the Iraqi occupation.

But there will be no official celebrations this week because more than 700 Kuwaitis remain imprisoned in Iraq.

The emir, Sheik Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, said Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's military power was still a cause for deep concern.

"The despot still keeps a force that is capable of terrorizing," the emir said.

"The forces of the evil invasion are waiting for a hole to open in the wall of our solidarity," he added. Iraq's army is believed to comprise about 500,000 troops.

It took less than a day for about 100,000 Iraqi soldiers to overrun the country on Aug 2, 1990. American forces led an international coalition that drove the Iraqis out at the end of a 40-day war.

Kuwait's entire government fled the country on the morning of the occupation, and Sheik Jaber paid tribute to the Kuwaitis who stayed behind.

There have been sharp divisions since liberation between the 400,000 people who fled or stayed out during the invasion, and the more than 200,000 Kuwaitis who remained behind.

But Sheik Jaber called for unity, especially in the period leading up to parliamentary elections in October.

"We learned from the crisis of the invasion and liberation that being divided and fighting amongst ourselves attracts those who have evil intentions toward our small country. These divisions have nothing to do with democracy," the emir said.

The elections will be the first such balloting since the government dissolved the parliament in 1986.



NEW DELHI, Congress (I) leader Beant Singh, Punjab's next chief minister and fellow party members poised for pictures after meeting in the Indian capital to decide on forming the state's new government. — AFP/UNB photo

Shi'ite leader fears major Iraqi attack within 12 days

TEHRAN, Feb 23: The Iraqi army is preparing to launch a major onslaught against Shi'ite Muslims in southern Iraq within 12 days, an Iraqi opposition leader has said, reports AFP.

Ayatollah Mohammad Baqr Hakim made the disclosure in an interview with the official Iranian News Agency IRNA. Hakim is currently visiting Saudi Arabia, where he is reportedly attending a gathering of the Iraqi opposition.

"The Baathists (Iraqi) forces are getting ready for a large-scale attack against (Shi'ite) Muslims in southern Iraq," the head of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI) said.

"The attack is to take place within the next 12 days and the Baathists (Iraqi forces) have made massive preparations for the assault," he told IRNA citing information from Iraqi Mujahideen inside Iraq.

IRNA said Ayatollah Hakim would be meeting in Saudi Arabia with King Fahd and other government officials to brief them on the latest developments in Iraq and the action taken by the opposition forces.

Ayatollah Hakim said Iraqi opposition militants "killed or wounded a large number of government forces" last week in operations in Basra and Al-Amara, in Southern Iraq.

"The Iraqi Muslim revolutionaries are resolutely determined to overthrow the Baathist regime, establish an Islamic government in the country and will speed up their struggle," he said.

Reuters from New York adds: Iraq's civilian infrastructure suffered greater damage during the Gulf War than allied forces had intended, according to a new Defence Department draft report.

The report, parts of which were obtained by the New York Times and published in its Sunday editions, shows that a failure to communicate targeting restrictions during the air war resulted in unintended damage to Iraq's electrical generating plants.

One of the air war's central aims was to paralyse Iraq's command structure without doing long-term damage to the civilian infrastructure.

But according to the report, senior commanders made deliberate exceptions to the policy of limited damage to some power installations.

In addition, orders restricting the targeting of key electrical generators were in some cases not passed on to units in the field.

Refugee problems discussed with Ghali

NEW YORK, Feb 23: Ambassador Humayun Kabir, Permanent Representative to the United Nations, called on the Secretary-General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros-Ghali on Thursday last to discuss a wide range of issues of particular interest to Bangladesh, reports BSS.

He conveyed the grave concern of the government and the people of Bangladesh at the serious situation by the continued influx of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh.

The Ambassador handed over the letter of Foreign Minister A S M Mustafizur Rahman addressed to the Secretary-General on the issue seeking international help and support to defuse the current situation as well as to ensure speedy return of all refugees from Myanmar to their country in full safety.

The Secretary-General had a comprehensive discussion on the problem arising out of the influx of the Rohingya refugees with the Bangladesh Permanent Representative and all possible steps which might be taken to help the refugees under the given condition. Ghali demonstrated great understanding of the way Bangladesh was coping with the current problem.

ME peace talks

Israeli delegates leave for US

JERUSALEM, Feb 23: Israeli delegates left Tel Aviv today for a Fourth Round of direct talks in Washington with their counterparts from neighbouring Arab states and the Palestinians, the Foreign Ministry announced, reports AP.

The delegates were not given a mandate to reveal details of an Israeli autonomy plan for the Palestinians, according to high-ranking Israeli officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity. Israeli hopes this round of talks with the Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians and Palestinians, due to open tomorrow, will choose site in the Middle East for the next round of bilateral talks, the officials said.

The four Arab delegations left earlier for Washington.

US lifts sanctions against high-tech sales to China

WASHINGTON, Feb 23: The Bush administration has lifted sanctions against high-tech sales to China, US State Department announcement said on Friday, reports PTI.

The US had imposed these sanctions when it discovered that China, in violation of the earlier undertakings had sent missile launchers for its newly-developed M-11 missiles to Pakistan.

BRIEFLY

NATO chief in Ukraine: NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner met Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk in Kiev Saturday at the start of his first visit to members of the new Commonwealth of Independent States, Itar-Tass news agency said, reports AFP from Moscow.

The two discussed Ukrainian cooperation with other former Soviet states, notably on nuclear arms, the agency said.

On Sunday, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization chief is to meet with Ukraine's Foreign Minister Anatoly Zlenko and Defence Minister Constantin Morozov.

Earlier, during a 24-hour stop over in Bucharest, Woerner warned that forces resisting democracy and reform were still at work.

Bandits kill two CIS soldiers:

Two soldiers in the armed forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) have been killed by "bandits" near their base in Azerbaijan, the Itar-Tass news agency reported Saturday, says AFP from Moscow.

The two soldiers, members of a paratroop division, died in a shootout Friday at Genji, one of the largest bases of the former Soviet army in Azerbaijan, the news agency said.

It said the two soldiers were near the entrance to their base when they were stopped by a group of gunmen who wanted to steal their weapons and vehicle.

One of the soldiers was shot dead when he refused to turn over his gun, Itar-Tass said. The other soldier shot dead three of the "bandits" and wounded another before he was shot dead by a fifth gunman.

Kazakh President in Pakistan:

The President of the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, arrived in Pakistan on Saturday for political and economic talks, reports Reuter from Islamabad.

Nazarbayev arrived in the eastern city of Lahore from New Delhi and is to begin his official visit in Islamabad Sunday.

Pakistan, keen to establish links with Kazakhstan and former Soviet republics in central Asia, is due to sign four agreements with Nazarbayev covering economic, diplomatic and cultural cooperation, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

The talks are also expected to cover efforts to end the conflict in Afghanistan.

Riyadh sets up ties with Tajikistan:

Saudi Arabia established diplomatic relations with Tajikistan on Saturday as part of a diplomatic offensive to foster links with the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union, reports AP from Riyadh.

Prince Saud al-Faisal was in Tajikistan to establish relations. Tajikistan was the second leg of his tour which began in Uzbekistan on Thursday and led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between those two states. After Tajikistan, Prince Saud will visit Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

Diplomatic sources said diplomatic relations were expected with the other republics the prince will visit.

Two killed in US ship fire:

Two sailors were killed and four injured Saturday in an engine-room fire aboard a Navy destroyer, the Navy said, reports AP from Norfolk.

The fire occurred aboard the USS Dahlgren and was extinguished within 20 minutes, said Jim Brantley, a spokesman for the Norfolk-based Atlantic Fleet.

Names of the dead and injured were not released, pending notification of relatives.

The fire occurred as the Dahlgren conducted routine operations about 200 miles (320 kilometers) off the North Carolina coast, Brantley said. After the fire, the 31-year-old ship steamed toward Norfolk under its own power, he said.

Tamils want UN-mediated solution to Lankan crisis

COLOMBO, Feb 23: Sri Lanka's Tamil rebel chieftain has called in a rare interview for a UN-mediated political settlement to the island's nine-year ethnic conflict, reports Reuter.

Vulupillai Prabhakaran also warned the government not to attempt a large-scale invasion of the rebel stronghold in Jaffna Peninsula in Northern Sri Lanka.

Prabhakaran leads the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam which have fought since 1983 for a homeland called Eelam for Sri Lanka's minority Tamil community. Thousands have died in the fighting.

Calling for a settlement under UN auspices, he told the independent Sunday island newspaper an offensive "would motivate us towards permanent separation as our main objective in the past was Tamil Eelam."

The military has denied planning any offensive to take over the Jaffna Peninsula, but residents say large number of troops and tanks have gone to northern camps in preparation for battle.

In recent months, the rebels have indicated an interest in a negotiated settlement to the conflict through the establishment of an autonomous administration in the North and East of the island.

The interview with Prabhakaran — only his second in

the past two years — took place on January 26 and was published today.

Referring to food shortages in the Peninsula, Prabhakaran said economic strangulation was the last resort of a weak enemy.

"By starving our people... it is an attempt to weaken their resistance and determination to fight. Our people have an inexhaustible thirst for liberation and will not yield to the pangs of hunger."

The government says there is sufficient food in the Peninsula. But journalists who recently visited Jaffna said there were acute shortages and people were struggling to cope.

India has embarked on a new pragmatic foreign policy

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: India, after blundering into the new year confused and orphaned by the collapse of the Soviet Union, has embarked on a new pragmatic foreign policy marked by a just-announced Presidential visit to Beijing, reports AFP.

In the space of a few months New Delhi has restored ties with Israel, changed its UN voting pattern on the Zionist issue and stepped up defence links with the United States.

In has also promised that President Ramaswamy Venkataraman will visit Beijing in May and started racing Islamabad to cement ties with the Central Asian Republics.

Closer to home, fences with Kuwait are being patched up, trouble on the precarious Indo-Pakistan border has been

contained, a prime ministerial visit to Mauritius is in the offing and repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees from India is under way.

Nor has the new Moscow been forgotten, despite a disastrous start which left New Delhi red-faced when it briefly expressed support for last year's hard-line coup plotters.

Delegations, most of them related to the only recently thriving rupee-ruble trade, are winging their way back and forth, trying to unravel the tangle of currency, banking and transportation problems.

Last but not least, Moscow's military and defence-industry personnel are finally constituting on how to overcome New Delhi's shortage of military spare parts for Soviet-supplies war equipment.

The new policies, many of

them wrenching to Indian traditionalists long wedded to the anti-US side of the Non-Aligned Movement, and worrying to Tibetans, have a common keynote of pragmatism, diplomats here say.

The traditionalists can be somewhat assuaged by strong statements against the dangers of "uni-polar" — Washington's — control of the post Soviet world, and also by India's necessarily delicate balancing act with the Muslim world.

With voices increasingly raised in Washington over fears of "Islamic Fundamentalism," India, with a massive minority of 100 million Muslims, of necessity has a more complex approach despite long held fears of a hostile encirclement by Muslim countries, Indian diplomatic sources note.

But the Tibetans, on their side, seem to have little to hope for.

Dalai Lama

The 100,000 refugees who followed the Dalai Lama here 33 years ago have stepped up demonstration in New Delhi in recent weeks against what they see as the flip-side of limited detente — a hardening of New Delhi's long-held position that Tibet is an autonomous region of China.

Sandwiched between the two giants, they see their independence fight shunted aside by an unstated coincidence of interests in Beijing and New Delhi in ensuring peace among their own minority Muslim groups.

They emphasise on pragmatism and secularism, and also New Delhi's constant worry of being hemmed in by Muslim states, was reflected again with weekend in contacts with Kazakhstan.

In the signing of the memorandums setting up formal diplomatic, trade and cultural ties, both sides, went out of their way to emphasise the strengthening of "secular bonds" and to bad-mouth Islamic Fundamentalism.

Highlighting the new ties with the United States, buoyed by India's Israel and Zionism decisions, has been a spate of visits by defence officials, and a planned trip to Washington next month by Indian Foreign Secretary J N Dixit.

On January 24 Indian naval and army officials held talks here with a high-level US delegation headed by Lieutenant General Johnny Corns, commander of the US Pacific command.

Defence Minister Sharad Pawar, announcing new joint training and information exchange programmes, said Washington and New Delhi were ready for "openness in the defence relationship."

Foreign Ministry sources say that Dixit will push, along with Japan, the idea of an expanded UN Security Council, and let Washington know that India still does not want to sign any regional non-proliferation pact.

While it is a long way from Hindi-China Bhai Bhai (pre-Sino-Indian was brotherhood), it (foreign policy) is back to a more even keel," commented one veteran foreign policy watcher here.

He was referring to the firm tilt toward the Soviet camp when Moscow came to Delhi's help during the 1962 Sino-Indian war.



PARIS: US actor Sylvester Stallone was given a special Cesar award by Polish movie director Roman Polanski (R) during the Cesars Gala, the French movie awards ceremony held here February 22. — AFP/UNB photo

'I'm already in heaven'

PARIS: With nary an "ugh" or a "yo," Sylvester Stallone spoke eloquently Friday as France anointed him a man of culture and presented him with one of its highest artistic awards, reports AP.

"I've been honoured before, but I rarely felt I was understood," Stallone said. "If I die right now, I don't mind, because I'm already in heaven."

Culture Minister Jack Lang, pinning a green and gold medal on Stallone, anointed him an Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters.

Lang, who a decade ago gained notoriety as the Atlantic for denouncing America's "cultural imperialism," described the actor who incarnated the boxer Rocky and the commando Rambo as "a living legend."

"Sylvester Stallone escapes all attempts at classification, whether adulated or vilified," said Lang in a brief ceremony at the Culture Ministry.