

Venkataraman accuses Pakistan of defaming India

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: The President, R Venkataraman, today accused Pakistan of continuing its massive propaganda and disinformation campaign to defame India and said it was doing so to divert world attention from its overt and covert support to terrorism, reports PTI.

In his address to both houses of parliament on the opening day of the budget session, the President said: "The involvement of forces across the border in aiding, arming and providing logistic support to the terrorists in Kashmir is now well known."

Pointing out that despite many serious problems, the government's promise to hold elections in Punjab had been fulfilled, Venkataraman said: "The government is committed to finding a just and amicable solution to issues in Punjab."

ME peace talks in danger of collapsing, warns Palestinian leader

WASHINGTON, Feb 24: Warning that a fourth round of Middle East peace talks are in danger of collapsing, a Palestinian leader on Sunday urged the United States to declare publicly that Israel must freeze Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, reports Reuter.

Faisal Al-Husseini, head of the Palestinian team that enters a fourth round of talks with Israel today, told Reuters that the United States must clearly and publicly voice its opposition to Israel's settlement policy.

He said Washington should bring about a total freeze of settlement building by cutting the more than three billion dollars a year in US aid to Israel.

US must publicly oppose Israel's Jewish policy

Israel will hold bilateral talks in Washington with Syria, Lebanon and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

US Secretary of State James Baker is to testify today before the Senate Appropriations Committee on Israel's request for 10 billion dollars in loan guarantees to finance the settlement of Jewish immigrants.

"We hope Baker's position will be clear today finalising the issue...the peace process is in danger," Hussein said in an interview in Washington.

Arab sources in Washington said Baker was expected to visit the Middle East in mid-April to follow up on the talks, stopping in Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia as well as meeting Palestinians.

Husseini, who discussed the loan guarantees with Baker last week, said Washington would be "destroying the peace process with its own hands and defeating it" if Israel won the guarantees and was allowed to continue housing Jews on land occupied in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Arab diplomats in Washington said Baker favoured letting Israel complete some 6,000 units under construction. The Palestinians are insisting on a total freeze.

"Settlements must stop, first by stopping the guarantees and then extended to decreasing the American aid" said Hussein, who has informed Baker of this demand.

He said Baker assured him on Thursday that the United States "will not allow its economic assistance (to Israel) to be used against its (US) policy."

The Arab delegations to the talks met on Sunday night to coordinate positions. Arab diplomats said the settlements issue was the focus of their discussions.

They said the Palestinians would fight to place the issue atop their agenda with the Israelis. "This can make or break the whole process," one Arab delegate said.

But, diplomats said, they might not push for it on the first day of the talks, waiting for Baker to explain the US position at the congressional hearing.

An Arab delegate blamed Israel for creating an atmosphere of "war, fighting and struggle" in the Middle East days before the Washington talks.

AP adds: Israeli and Arab negotiators prepared Monday to resume peace talks involving Palestinian self-rule. Syria's bid to recover the Golan Heights and Israel's presence in Southern Lebanon.

The fact that Israel, Syria, Palestinian Arabs, Lebanon and Jordan all agreed to send their delegations here indicated a joint commitment to keep negotiating even though their talks until now have been inconclusive.

Arriving in Washington late Sunday, Ely Akim Rubinstein,

Najibullah to be replaced soon: Sevan

ISLAMABAD, Feb 24: A political settlement for Afghanistan is in sight and a transitional government could replace the Najibullah administration in Kabul by the end of this summer, UN envoy Benon Sevan said Sunday, reports AP.

"I am optimistic," Sevan, the UN Security General's personal representative in Afghanistan and Pakistan, told a press conference after nearly a month of consultations in the region.

Despite the pullout of Soviet troops three years ago, the Afghan conflict has continued between Kabul government forces and a host of Mujahideen guerrilla armies backed by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

BRIEFLY

NATO chief in Moscow: NATO Secretary-General Manfred Womern arrived in Moscow on Sunday for talks expected to cover the future of the former Soviet army and efforts to maintain a united command for nuclear forces, Reuter reports from Moscow.

Womern was due to hold talks with Armed Forces Chief Yevgeny Shaposhnikov and Vice-President Alexander Rutskoi Monday and to meet President Boris Yeltsin on Tuesday.

Rebels kill 15 Colombians: Leftist rebels bombed a truck carrying Colombian army troops, killing 15 people in one of the bloodiest guerrilla attacks in weeks, authorities said on Sunday, Reuter reports from Bogota.

Rebels from the Simon Bolivar guerrilla coordinator attacked the truck with dynamite and gunfire as it drove down a remote road on Saturday afternoon, killing 14 soldiers and the civilian driver and wounding seven other people.

The attack near Puerto Berrio, 150 km north of Bogota, occurred only hours after the rebels asked the government for a delay in resuming peace talks.

The talks had been scheduled to resume on Monday but will begin later in the week at the earliest, officials said.

EC to help protect human rights: Foreign ministers from the European Community were expected to adopt a four-year programme to help protect human rights in Central America at a meeting here with their counterparts from the region, AP reports from Lisbon.

The programme - which would cost 1.5 million European Currency Units (dir 1.9 million) annually - seeks to improve human rights legislation and provide training for police, military and judicial authorities.

A commission of EC and Central American experts, based in San Jose, Costa Rica, would supervise the plan.

The two-day meeting beginning Monday in Lisbon's waterfront Belem Cultural Center was expected to draw ministers from Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia - as well officials from the 12 EC nations.

Filipino reds to probe massacre: Communist rebels said Monday they will investigate the military's allegations that guerrillas massacred survivors of an ambush on Mindanao Island in which at least 41 government troops died, AP reports from Manila.

The National Democratic Front also called on the government to respond to rebel offers to draft a mutual code of conduct for treatment of civilians and combatants in the 23-year insurgency.

On February 15, New People's Army rebels ambushed a patrol in Surigao del Sur province, about 550 miles (880 kilometers) southeast of Manila, in the biggest battlefield defeat for the government this year.

Survivors said rebels killed survivors above the rank of sergeant after the three-hour gun battle.

Honecker leaves embassy: Former East German leader Erich Honecker left the refuge of the Chilean Embassy on Monday to undergo medical treatment at a Moscow hospital, an embassy official said, AP reports from Moscow.

Honecker, 79, is reported to be suffering from cancer and depression. He sought refuge in the embassy in December after Russia threatened to expel him, and has remained there since.

A secretary to the Chilean ambassador said Honecker was on his way to Botkin hospital, an elite clinic that caters to foreign diplomats and business people. A spokeswoman for the hospital confirmed that he was expected.

Germany is seeking the return of Honecker to face criminal charges relating to the shootings of would-be East German escapees. Chile has offered to accept him on humanitarian grounds.

240 parties to contest polls: More than 240 political parties registered by Sunday's deadline for the April 5 general elections, Italy's Interior Ministry reported, AP says from Rome.

More than half of the parties listed were regional.

To register for elections, each party must submit a political symbol and list of signatures.

The Lombard League, an upstart party advocating a smaller role for the central government and increased local autonomy, spawned imitators all over the country. Some 120 of the parties registering were regional Leagues according to the Milan newspaper Corriere della Sera.

Also registered were five parties representing automobile enthusiasts, four aimed at housekeepers and three for hunters' rights.



On his recent London visit ASM Mostafizur Rahman, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, talked to the BBC Bengali Service about his country's problems with Burma in an in-depth interview. The Foreign Minister told Serajur Rahman, Deputy Head of the Bengali Service, that Bangladesh had expected Burma to speedily repatriate the thousands of Rohingya Muslim refugees who had recently flooded into the country. But the authorities in Rangoon had failed to do so and Bangladesh has been obliged to seek international help in caring for the refugees.

Myanmar junta throwing teenagers into front line

KAREN-Frontline, Myanmar, Feb 24: Hundreds of ill-trained teenagers are being thrown into the front line by Myanmar's military junta in the bloody battle for Manerplaw, the symbolic capital of the anti-government resistance movement, reports AP.

Myanmar prisoners of war, some as young as 15, tell harrowing tales of their fight against the Karens in some of the most inhospitable fighting terrain in the world.

Their stories reveal that although the government troops being used in a massive dry season offensive to try and finally crush the 43-year-old Karen.

Struggle for greater autonomy out number the opposition more than five to one, the quality of the troops on the two sides is vastly different.

Most of the Karens are seasoned fighters, used to the Tortuous mountain paths that wind their way around the al-

most vertical slopes that act as a natural wall protecting Manerplaw.

For many of the government troops, climbing through the dense, lush jungle, it is more a question of survival than trying to launch a serious attack.

"It was terrifying. I had no idea what to expect before I arrived at the front. I was totally unprepared," 15 year-old Win Hle told AFP minutes after giving himself up to Karen soldiers.

The slightly built Win Hle, his poorly fitting army shirt spattered with blood, was near collapse as he was led into the Karen's front line position high above the Saleen river.

"I have been in the jungle for two weeks and have had almost no sleep. I am exhausted. I don't want to die. I want to live" the youth said, his right index finger split open and cut to the bone in what he said was an accident at his camp.

Other captured Myanmar teenagers tell similar nightmare stories, adding that hundreds of their colleagues are also in their teens.

Kyaw Moe, still wearing his dog tag stamped with the number 780345b, enlisted with the army nine months ago and was sent to the 66th division.

"I had six months training but what I learnt there bears no resemblance to the conditions here. I have never been so scared in my life," 17-year-old Kyaw Moe said.

He was one of almost 500 government troops trying to cut off the Karen's supply route

to sleeping dog mountain, the key defensive position to Manerplaw.

The plan was to sneak through Karen positions and come around the back of the mountain while mortar units continued their heavy shelling on the other side.

But the vastly more mobile Karens cut off Kyaw Moe and his fellow soldiers, and after a six day deadly game of hide and seek the Myanmar troops were in total disarray, fleeing for their lives.

Kyaw Moe and three of his friends got separated from the main group. Before Kyaw Moe surrendered, his three friends had been shot dead by the Karens.

Aung Niang was one of 20 troops trying to thread their way back to their camp through the Karen lines. But after at least 10 of his colleagues were killed in a furious one-hour firefight, Aung Niang surrendered.



MANERPLAW: Myanmar-Karen guerrillas, one holding a rocket propelled grenade launcher, rest at their frontline position during a lull in fighting against Myanmar government troops Thursday. —AFP/UNB photo

Bihar put on alert

RANCHI, Feb 24: A fresh security alert has been sounded in tribal Bihar to deal with the proposed Jharkhand Bandh on March one and the subsequent five-day economic blockade programme of the All Jharkhand Students' Union and the Jharkhand Peoples' Party.

Official sources told PTI here today that security arrangements were being beefed up by the Bihar government as a precautionary measure.

Sihanouk favours five years term of president

PHNOM PENH, Feb 24: Cambodian Head of State Prince Norodom Sihanouk said on Sunday he favoured a five-year presidential term, reports Reuter.

"It is useless to be elected for life," said Sihanouk who ruled Cambodia as prince and head of state until he was toppled by a US-backed coup in 1970.

He said the people should elect their president for five years with a possibility of a second term.

Cambodians might accept him for ten years, Sihanouk said at the royal palace during an official welcome for a visiting Australian minister. "It's long but they may accept".

"The Cambodian people, they are like the French, they don't like a president for life,

Taj Mahal is buffeted by a variety of pollutants

AGRA, Feb 24: The Taj Mahal survived three centuries of war, flood, and abuse, but now pollution threatens the monument to love, one of mankind's most magnificent structures, reports AP.

Even the US Park Service is helping rescue the gleaming Taj, which has become a symbol of India and exotic romance.

It has joined about a dozen Indian agencies and hundreds of experts, from botanists to architects, in devising ways to preserve the white marble tomb erected by an emperor for his queen in the 17th century.

The inside of the dome is blackened from candles lighted daily on the graves of Emperor Shah Jahan and his wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died

Vote counting begins in Malta

VALLETTA, Malta, Feb 24: Election officials Sunday began the daunting task of hand counting ballots for national elections that saw more than 96 per cent of eligible voters participate, reports AP.

First returns from Saturday's general election are not expected before Monday morning and the winning party will not be known until hours later.

Buoyant officials from the governing Nationalist Party confidently predicted that they would win another five years at the helm.

The Nationalists and their leader, Prime Minister Edward French Adams, sought a mandate to continue moving this strategic island-nation closer to the European Community economically and in foreign policy.

150 killed in Algerian clashes

ALGIERS, Feb 24: Clashes between Algerian security forces and Islamic Fundamentalists have left 150 dead and 700 wounded, and some 30,000 Muslim militants have been arrested since authorities began their crackdown on the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), the movement said, reports AP.

Statistics were published in the official organ of the Algiers bureau of the FIS, the Minbar el Djoumouaa, a copy of which was made available to AFP Monday.

The newspaper did not say when its toll had been drawn up. The crisis began January 11 when then-president Chadli Bendjedid resigned and a military-backed council took power and cancelled national elections which the FIS was poised to win.

Meanwhile, the Algerian League For the Defence of Human Rights called Sunday for the closure of camps set up in the Sahara desert to hold people arrested since a crackdown on the mainly Islamic opposition began last month.

Off the Record

She was raped by her friend's father

DUBLIN: A 14-year-old girl's fight to have an abortion abroad has developed into a battle between a nation's conservative Roman Catholic traditions and the wider, freer horizons of Europe, reports AP.

The girl's case, scheduled to go to the Supreme Court on Monday has revived calls for a new constitutional referendum on abortion.

It also has escalated the struggle between reformers and defenders of the status quo in this predominantly Catholic country.

"It's time we had a rethink on Irish society," said Rita Burtenshaw, director of Dublin's Well Women Clinic.

But in the western and rural areas, changes may be coming too quickly for the people and their church.

The case of the unidentified girl could hardly be more dramatic. She says she was raped by the father of a friend after two years of sexual abuse.

Sean Connery: The father of all manly men

NEW YORK: Unlike Samson, his presence is just as potent without a full head of hair. When he pours himself a cup of steaming tea, he ignores the dainty spoon nestled in the saucer. He plunges a large hand into the cup, squeezes the teabag with his fingers, tosses it aside and takes a big gulp, reports AP.

The name? Connery, Sean Connery.

At 62, Connery is beginning his fourth decade as an actor with Pictures. He portrays an eccentric biochemist who has discovered a cure for cancer in the Amazon rain forest. His love interest, Lorain Bracco, is young enough to be his daughter. His career has spanned more than 30 years of serious theater and film, but Connery has grown accustomed to the visceral reaction he evokes as one of the screen's most enduring sex symbols.

When People magazine called two years ago to get his response to the news that he had been anointed "The Sexiest Man Alive," Connery was not impressed.

His only goal is to help women having babies

ALEXANDRIA, Va: An infertility doctor on trial for alleged fraud is being portrayed as either a cruel deceiver or a kindly man whose only goal was to help women have babies, reports AP.

Prosecutor says Dr Cecil Jacobson deliberately tricked some women into believing they were pregnant when they were not and used his own sperm to artificially inseminate others while claiming to use an anonymous donor bank.

The defense paints him as a doctor who may have made mistakes, but got results for many women with his form of "natural" fertility medicines.

"If he had a fault, Dr Jacobson's fault was that he tried too hard", defense lawyer James Tate told the eight-woman, four-man jury.

Jacobson's trial on 52 counts of fraud and perjury enters its third week Monday.

Medical experts and former Jacobson patients have testified on both sides of the case.

"The issue is for me that he said I was pregnant when I wasn't and led me through believing I had lost two babies," said a tearful Deborah S Gregory, the first witness. "The fact that he lied to me is the issue for me."

One woman, who said Jacobson promised to find and anonymous donor to match her husband's physical characteristics, said she was angry because her child looks just like Dr Jacobson.

I'm basically a coward'

LONDON, Feb 24: It has taken 57 years of gathering courage for Eileen Atkins to tackle her first American part, reports AP.

One of Britain's leading actresses, she's playing the itinerant artist Hannah Jelkes, who has been traveling the world with her poet-grandfather, Mono in Tennessee Williams' "The Night of the Iguana." It opened February 6 in a major revival at the Royal National Theater.

Astonishingly, it marks Atkins' debut as an American after decades of playing women notable for their fire and ferocity: Euripides Medea, Ibsen's Hedda Gabler and Virginia Woolf in her solo show "A Room of One's Own" off-Broadway and on a US tour last year.

"I'm basically a coward," Atkins said, laughing, as she elaborated on her past connections to Williams.

She twice turned down the role of Blanche du Bois in "A Streetcar Named Desire". She once rehearsed in a lesser-known Williams play, "Period of Adjustment," but the production was canceled when the director had a heart attack.