

Myanmar prisoners ordered to work as front-line porters

MAE SOT, Thailand, Mar 3: Myanmar has ordered hundreds of prisoners from its jails to work as front line porters in the jungle war against Karen guerrillas, Myanmar traders said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

The traders, interviewed in this Thai border town, quoted porters as saying they had been taken from jails in the Myanmar cities of Mandalay, Moulmein and Yangon.

A Karen refugee official said one escaped porter had told him he had been in Moulmein jail for three months before soldiers dragged him from his cell and sent him to the front line.

The sources said hundreds of prisoners had been taken as porters to ferry equipment and supplies to soldiers fighting an insurgency by the Karen, one of several ethnic minorities fighting Myanmar's military junta.

One trader said the army normally took its porters from villages in eastern Karen state.

"But Myanmar men are now living in such a state of fear that they run away from their villages when the soldiers show up. That's why they have to use the inmates as porters," he said.

About 400 civilians are reported to have been rounded up as porters recently in the Karen towns of Myawadi and Kawkaetk.

Myanmar troops mortared and shelled the Karen guerrilla base of Kaw Moo Ra early on Tuesday, a Thai army source said.

The source said Myanmar aircraft had also bombed the town of Manerplaw, where the guerrillas have their headquarters, for the sixth consecutive day.

Jets flew six sorties against Manerplaw, some 130 km (80 miles) north of Mae Sot, on Monday and the army had brought 400 more soldiers to its front line at Kaw Moo Ra, where guerrilla and government troops are only 500 metres (yards) apart, he said.

"We expect heavy fighting very soon at Kaw Moo Ra," the source said.

Kaw Moo Ra is on the Myanmar side of the Moet river just opposite the Thai village of Wangkaew. It and Manerplaw are the only major Karen bases left on the Thai frontier.

In recent years the guerrillas, who have been fighting Yangon for more than 40 years, have been forced into smaller enclaves by successive government offensives.

Tel Aviv to keep security Israel offers interim transfer of power to Palestinians

WASHINGTON, Mar 3: Israel negotiators at Middle East peace talks here have presented a working document on the future of the occupied territories which proposes and interim transfer of some administrative powers to the Palestinians, reports AFP.

The document, a copy of which was obtained by AFP, is entitled "ideas for a peaceful coexistence in the territories during the interim period". It was presented on February 24, but has not been officially released.

An Israeli spokesman Monday refused to confirm or deny the authenticity of the copy obtained by AFP.

Here are the principal excerpts from the document:

In the first part, under the heading "general concept", the document states that "the wounds inflicted by the long and bitter Arab-Israeli conflict need a time for healing, and trust must be built gradually."

The deeply differing points of view of the parties concerned, cannot be bridged in one comprehensive step. The gap can be bridged only through a process of building coexistence, through interim arrangements followed by an agreement on final status.

The interim arrangements should create a change in the reality of life of the Palestinian Arabs in the territories. (the change) should not prejudice the outcome of the final status negotiations; it must deal with people, not with the status of the territories...

"During the interim period, the Palestinian Arab inhabitants will be given, in the framework of the interim self-Government arrangements, an opportunity to run their own affairs in most spheres... Israelis will continue as of right, to live and settle in the territories. The sole responsibility for security in all its aspects — external, internal and public order — will be that of Israel."

The second part of the document, called Interim Self-Government Arrangements (ISGA), states:

"The organs of the ISGA, which will be agreed upon by the parties concerned, will be established in an agreed way. The basic structural and functional configurations of the ISGA will be determined in the course of the negotiations."

"The jurisdiction of the ISGA organs will apply to the Palestinian Arab inhabitants of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza district."

"In the negotiations Israel will propose to negotiate delegation of powers and responsibilities to the proper organs of ISGA in the following spheres of operation [...]

administration of justice; Administrative personnel matters; agriculture; education and culture; budget and taxation; health, industry, commerce and tourism; labour and social welfare; local police for criminal affairs, and maintenance of prisons for criminal offenders sentenced by local courts; local transportation and communications; municipal affairs; and religious affairs."

"Powers and responsibilities which are not delegated to be the agreed organs of the ISGA will be reserved by Israel, being the source of authority. The powers and responsibilities of the organs of the ISGA will not apply to the Israeli defence forces or to Israeli civilians in Judea, Samaria and Gaza district, as well as to the Palestinian Arabs who reside in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, which is not part of the territories."

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AZERBAIJAN: An Azeri refugee from the captured village Khojali, in the embattled enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, is helped on March 1 into a makeshift hospital. The man fled Khojali on February 26 after Armenian forces invaded, and trekked five days across snow-covered mountains to reach Agdam on the border of Nagorno-Karabakh. — AP/UNB photo

Move to make Baltic region a bloc of democracy

COPENHAGEN, March 3: Ten states meet here Thursday and Friday in a bid to transform the Baltic region, perhaps the least-publicised victim of the cold war, into a solid bloc of prosperity and democracy, reports AFP.

The talks are billed as a new chapter in the history of the Baltic Sea, whose wealth is starkly divided between the Scandinavian countries and Germany on one side, and the former Soviet-dominated territory of Eastern Europe on the other.

For German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who co-hosts the

meeting with Denmark's UFFE Ellemann-Jensen, "as chance is now in the offing" to revive the golden age of the Hanseatic states, when brash medieval traders criss-crossed the Baltic, fertilising its coastline with commerce and culture.

Danish officials say the meeting will set up a Baltic council, which will meet at ministerial level once a year to coordinate economic aid to the new democracies and look at the region's deepening environmental concerns.

Genscher said he would propose specific projects for joint infrastructure in the

Baltic, including coordinated road, sea and rail networks.

Common to Poland, Russia and the three ex-Soviet Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is a desperate need for capital and know-how, and the problems of building an efficient distribution system and coping with the end of subsidised energy prices.

In contrast, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland have among the highest standards of living in the world.

But only the very first steps have been taken in coordinating economic help from one side of this chilly sea to the other.

India urged to take Israeli help to arrest wanted Tamils

NEW DELHI, Mar 3: An Indian MP has urged New Delhi to take help from Israel to capture two Sri Lankan Tamil guerrillas wanted for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, a newspaper reported Tuesday, reports AFP.

Subramanian Swamy told reporters in Madras city Monday that Israel Mossad should be asked to seize Velupillai Prabhakaran and Pottu Amman from their base in northern Sri Lanka if Colombo's troops failed to do the job.

Lt Gen Javed new Pak intelligence chief

ISLAMABAD, Mar 3: Pakistan yesterday named an army engineer who is also an Islamic law preacher to be its new Intelligence Chief, reports Reuters.

The Defence Ministry said Lieutenant-General Javed Nasir had been appointed Director-General of the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which has been involved in Pakistan's past support for guerrillas fighting the Afghan government.

He replaces Major-General Mohammad Asad Durrani who will be given a new appointment by the Army General headquarters, a brief ministry announcement said.

The move came only a few weeks after Pakistan threw its weight behind an UN peace plan for Afghanistan to the anger of radical guerrillas seeking a military victory against Kabul.

BRIEFLY

Quakes shake Mount Pinatubo:

Scientists flew over Mount Pinatubo on Tuesday to inspect the volcano after earthquakes shook the area for two days, reports AP from Manila.

The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said 24 high-frequency earthquakes were recorded at the volcano during the 24 hours ending at 6 am. Tuesday (2300 GMT Monday) compared with 28 the previous day.

The institute said that the earthquakes originated 10-16 kilometers (6-10 miles) under the volcano, which is about 100 kilometers (60 miles) north of the volcano, which is about 100 kilometers (60 miles) northwest of Manila.

Three low-frequency earthquakes reported Monday were probably caused by the sudden release of pressurized pockets of steam and gas at a shallower depth below the crater, the institute said.

3 Kurdish rebels killed:

Security forces have killed three rebels of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey's southeastern province of Van, the local press reported Monday, Xinhua from Istanbul.

Reports said that security forces Sunday surrounded a house in the Karayali village of the province, where the PKK rebels were staying.

An armed clash broke out after the rebels ignored an order to surrender. During the clash three rebels were killed, including two women.

Officials in Mardin province said Sunday that two Turkish teenagers kidnapped Saturday were shot dead in the town of Nusaybin.

Cyclone hits Australian coast:

A cyclone, with winds of up to 180 km (112 miles) an hour, hit a sparsely populated part of the coast of western Australia early Tuesday, Meteorologists said, reports Reuter from Perth.

Tropical cyclone Ian crossed the remote north-western coast but weakened as it headed inland, a spokesman for the west Australian tropical cyclone warning section said.

No injuries were reported in the area about 1,500 km (930 miles) north of Perth.

Officials said the cyclone was headed for the Pilbara mining region and the town of Pannawonica, an iron ore mining community with a population of about 600.

Anti-abortion group backs Bush:

The National Right to Life Committee, a leading anti-abortion group, endorsed President Bush on Monday, on the eve of his new push to reclaim some religious and conservative support from Pat Buchanan in the presidential election campaign, reports AP from Washington.

"Mr Bush has been absolutely solid on this issue and he has given us everything he promised," said Wanda Franz, president of the group. "We want to send a message and the message we want to send is 'Thank You, Mr Bush.'"

On Tuesday, the president is flying to Chicago to address the 50th Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, another in the efforts he and Vice President Dan Quayle are making to bring conservatives into their fold.

The president had his picture taken Monday with the top officials of the right to life group, which has members in all 50 states.

7 bodies found in Colombia:

Police said Monday they had found the remains of 30 people at a Colombian university, thought to be victims of a gang that murdered down-and-outs and sold the bodies to a medical school, reports Reuter from Bogota, Colombia.

The macabre discovery was made after a badly wounded garbage collector escaped on Sunday and told police he and several other garbage collectors had been attacked by security guards who lured them to the campus of the free university in the steamy Caribbean port city of Barranquilla.

The police searched the university on Sunday and found the bodies of seven men and three women in the medical school as well as 20 skulls, 15 lungs, 20 brains and 15 limbs, a police statement said.

US veto a wise decision: China

BEIJING, Mar 3: Beijing said on Tuesday US President George Bush's veto of legislation attaching conditions to trade with China was a wise decision that would help put the US-China relationship back on track, reports Reuter.

"We believe it was a very wise decision which will be of great help to the future development of Sino-US relations," a spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade said.

Bush's veto on Monday effectively scuttled a Congressional bill linking renewal of China's most favoured nation (MFN) trade status to improvements in Beijing's human rights, trade and missile technology export policies.

Baker proposes cut in Israel's existing aid as penalty

WASHINGTON, Mar 3: Sen Patrick Leahy said Monday that Secretary of State James A Baker has proposed cutting Israel's existing foreign aid as a penalty for completing work already begun on settlements in the occupied territories, reports AP.

But Baker's spokeswoman, Margaret Tutwiler, said "that is not the position we are taking." She said Baker was advocating that any penalty be deducted from the loan guarantees themselves.

Leahy, a Vermont Democrat, reported Baker's position after meeting with the secretary in an attempt to reach agreement on conditions for meeting Israel's request for

10 billion dollar in loan guarantees over the next five years. It also was confirmed by a senior administration official.

Leahy said Baker has pushed for weeks to counter any money Israel spends on construction of settlements by deducting the same amount from Israel's cash aid under the Economic Support Fund, a 1.2 billion dollar annual gift that has remained constant for years and is seen by some as a virtual entitlement for Israel.

Administration officials confirmed that was Baker's view, but added that it was not holding up progress on the loan guarantees. The discussions are stalled by far more fundamental issues involving Israel's settlement plans, the

officials said.

Later a Leahy spokesman, Joe Jemele, said there was no misunderstanding. "He is not backing down on his statement," said Jemele, reiterating that the idea of an aid cut had been Baker's position throughout recent discussions on the loan guarantees.

The Bush administration regards settlements in the occupied territories — which it defines as the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and Golan Heights — as an obstacle to Middle East peace.

The current round of Middle East peace talks, now in its second week in Washington, has produced almost no progress, with the settlement of Israelis in dis-

puted territories one of the most divisive issues.

Israel is seeking the guarantee so it can obtain commercial loans to help resettle tens of thousands of Jewish emigrants, most of them from the former Soviet Union.

But Leahy, who had scheduled a meeting of his Senate Appropriations foreign aid subcommittee on Tuesday to act on the matter, said he was growing pessimistic.

"We have some strongly held positions in the administration which I can't buy onto, and some strongly held positions among members of Congress which I can't buy onto," Leahy said in a telephone interview.

"I'll keep on trying, but I'm

not as optimistic as I was on Friday," he said. "If it can't be done, it can't be done."

Among the difficult issues, Leahy said, was how to apply penalties against Israel should it choose to complete settlement construction that already had been begun on Jan. 1 of this year.

Leahy has proposed allowing the building to be completed, but deducting any amount spent from Israel's loan guarantee amount for the year. That would mean the Jewish state would receive a smaller amount of loan proceeds.

The Baker proposal, which would directly reduce cash aid to Israel, would be a more

Off the Record

Bush 'guilty of war crimes'

NEW YORK: International peace activists have found President George Bush guilty of war crimes in the Gulf conflict, former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark announced Monday, reports AFP.

Clark, a member of the mock international court made up of members from 33 countries, said Bush was indicted on 20 counts of "crimes against peace... and humanity in violation of the charter of the United Nations, the Geneva convention and other international agreements and customary international law."

Hundreds of peace activists met Saturday in New York to attend the court hearing which also brought charges against Vice President Dan Quayle, Defence Secretary Dick Cheney, as well as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, and the commander of the allied forces in the Gulf, retired General Norman Schwarzkopf.



Bush "intended an act to prevent any interference with his plan to destroy Iraq economically and militarily" following the August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, according to the indictment.

Other charges included attacks on Iraqi civilians and environmental damage caused during the conflict. The court also found that Bush violated international conventions when US troops invaded Panama in 1989.

Faked her own kidnapping to conceal a night

BASINGSTOKE, England: A married English woman who faked her own kidnapping to conceal a night spent with two lovers received a suspended sentence Monday for wasting police time, reports Reuter.

Police scoured two counties searching for the culprit after Caroline Mansfield, 28, was found bound and gagged beside her husband's burned-out car. She told police she had been snatched by armed thugs and terrorised for 24 hours.

But two days later she admitted concocting the story to hide the affairs from her husband.

Mansfield, who has two young children, sobbed after she was sentenced by a court to three months in jail, suspended for one year. She and her husband are divorcing.

She still believes he is a criminal

SEATTLE, Washington: The woman who accused Washington State Senator Brock Adams of drugging and molesting her at his Washington DC home nearly five years ago, said yesterday she still believes he is a criminal and that he should resign, reports Reuter.

"I believe he should resign from the Senate and I've believed that since 1987 when he assaulted me," Karl Tupper, now 29 and 5-1/2 months pregnant with her first child, told reporters at a packed news conference.

A probe by the US attorney's office in Washington DC found that Tupper's allegations were without merit but the incident has dogged Adams ever since it was made public.

"I believe what he did was a crime and criminals should be prosecuted," said Tupper, who first made her allegations public in deceit and protected by those close to him for so long.

Adams, a one-term Washington Democrat who served as US transportation secretary under President Jimmy Carter, has denied the charges.

Jilted bride dies waiting

READING, England: A jilted English bride who lived in her garden for 35 years after being abandoned by her fiancé was found dead at the weekend, reports Reuter.

Joan Abery, 70, had refused to go back into her home after being spurned at the church. She built herself a shelter from trees, twigs and brightly-coloured umbrellas in the front garden of her home and furnished it with car seats and briefcases.

She had left her house in Southern England unchanged since the day the wedding should have taken place.

'His glory was in his friends'

NEW YORK: More than 200 friends of Jay Sharbutt gathered on Monday to share laughter, memories and a sweetly sad sense of emptiness in final farewell to the much-loved TV critic of the Associated Press, reports AP.

"It's people like Jay who give a company a soul," AP President Louis D Boccardi told the gathering, held in a studio of NBC-TV, where Sharbutt once worked as a page. "... What Jay did was fill our lives."

Sharbutt, 51, was found dead of a heart attack last Wednesday.

He had worked as a Washington reporter, Vietnam and Persian Gulf war correspondent, New York theatre critic and senior TV reporter for the news cooperative, with time out from the AP for a stint as a Los Angeles Times TV writer.

But his true vocation was friendship. With unmatched wit and warmth, Sharbutt tickled and cheered a world full of friends in places high and low.

Said AP Special Correspondent George Esper, a former Vietnam bureau chief: "His glory -- as the poet William Butler Yeats said -- was in his friends, legions of them, who he entertained...encouraged...embraced."

Sharbutt, whose two marriages ended in divorce, is survived by a daughter, Julie, and his father, sister and brother.



Moammer Gaddafi

'Any attack on Libya to be end of Israel'

NICOSIA, Mar 3: Libyan President Moammer Gaddafi threatened yesterday to set fire to his country's oil wells if the United States invaded, the official Jana news agency reported in a dispatch monitored here, reports AFP.

In a speech to the Libyan parliament, the General People's Congress, Gaddafi said any attack against his country would herald the end of Israel as Jordanians, Palestinians, Egyptians and Lebanese could march into the Jewish state.

"I've alerted the Arab brethren that in the event of an attack against Libya each must fight the enemy from its end," Gaddafi said. "...they treat us like animals on which they experiment with missiles and exercise embargo's and question us on democracy, human rights and pluralism."

Gaddafi said Israeli pilots who shot down a civilian

Libyan plane over the Sinai in the early 1970s and a US navy officer who downed an Iranian Airliner in 1988 had been decorated because they had killed "Muslim rats."

Meanwhile, Libyan leader said he was not empowered to hand over two Libyans accused in the Lockerbie bombing and the decision could only be taken by local people's committees.

He told a meeting of the General People's Congress that the handover could only be authorised by the local committees, which function in factories, offices, farms and villages and are the source of all authority in the country.

His remarks appeared to be an attempt by Gaddafi to distance himself from a statement Sunday by his Foreign Minister, Ibrahim Al-Beshari, that the suspects could be tried on neutral ground.

Gaddafi, quoted in a dispatch from the Libyan news agency Jana received here, said he had told UN Secretary

General Boutros Boutros-Ghali he held "no presidential power".

He added that it was therefore not up to him to respond to UN demands — contained in Security Council resolution 731 — for Libyan cooperation with US British and French probes into the destruction of US and French airliners.

"The Security Council resolution does not mention the handover of citizens and their trial by another state, but calls on Libya to cooperate with investigations in the three countries — which we are doing," Gaddafi stressed.

Libya has refused demands by the United States and Britain for the extradition of two Libyan nationals indicted in the explosion of a Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988.

Lanka restores civil admn in rebel-held areas

COLOMBO, Mar 3: Government authorities Tuesday claimed civil administration has been restored in most of the rebel-controlled areas of the east and in some areas of the north, reports AP.

Elections to local bodies in the east can be held by the end of year because troops were making steady progress against the Tamil Tiger guerrillas, said S Ganeshanathan, chief secretary of the northeast provincial council.

Soldiers backed by artillery and helicopter gunships launched an operation last week to clear the areas and to kill as many militants as possible.