

India to help modernise Malaysian armed forces

NEW DELHI, Mar 23: India will assist Malaysia in the modernisation of its armed forces by selling sophisticated arms and training personnel, the Times of India reported today, says Xinhua.

India is likely to sell the indigenously assembled Donner-226 aircraft and Alouette-III helicopters to Malaysia as requested, according to defense sources quoted by the paper.

The Indian air force will train royal Malaysian air force pilots on Mig-29 aircraft.

The two countries have reached an understanding on sharing Indian expertise in a marine commando training, coastal surveillance anti-piracy operations, weather observation, coastal search and rescue operation, defense of ports and harbors, and shallow water mining capability.

Cory needs army help to transfer power

MANILA, Mar 23: President Corason Aquino urged the Philippine army today to help guarantee a smooth transfer of power to the next administration after the hotly contested May elections, reports AFP.

Aquino also told officers and men on the army's 95th anniversary that they should prepare for a new role with the ongoing withdrawal of US military forces from the country, and emerging regional cooperation on security.

"You have shown our people the responsible use of the powers of the military and upheld the wisdom of civilian supremacy," said Aquino, who has defeated seven coup plots by army factions since coming to power in 1986.

She said the May 11 elections for a new president, congress and local officials and the "Smooth transfer of power" when her term officially ends of June 30 "are challenges of

the democracy you have helped to strengthen."

"I expect you to remain non-partisan. I expect you to muster the where with all to ensure honest, orderly and peaceful elections," she said as she with all to ensure honest, orderly and peaceful elections.

The presence of an unprecedented eight presidential candidates makes it likely that the winner will not be able to muster a majority, raising fears of instability.

AP adds: After six weeks of warmups, the real campaign to succeed President Corason Aquino begins with Monday's entry of local candidates expected to build grass-roots support for presidential hopefuls.

More than 70,000 candidates for the House of Representatives, government,

mayors and other local posts have until midnight (1600 GMT) Monday to file their certificates with the Commission on Elections.



Corason Aquino Political analysts are watching carefully to see which of the eight presidential candidates, including Imelda Marcos, can attract influential

local politicians to their standards for the May 11 balloting. "Victory goes to whoever has the logistics and the political infrastructure that goes all the way down to the grass roots," commentator Emil Jurado said.

House Speaker Ramon Mitra, candidate of the Struggle for the Democratic Filipino, and Mrs Aquino's estranged cousin, Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco, are believed to have the strongest national machinery.

But Mrs Aquino's candidate, former Defence Secretary Fidel Ramos, has been making inroads into Mitra's organization and his campaign seems to be faring better.

Success in Philippine politics has traditionally been based less on issues and ideology than on forging alliances with local power-brokers, who can deliver the votes from their constituencies.

That factor is considered all the more important because of the absence of compelling issues dividing them.

All candidates generally support deregulating the economy, encouraging rural development and industrialization, decentralizing power from Manila and encouraging foreign investment.

Polls show that nearly a third of the electorate remains undecided. Strict rules forbid media advertising, making it difficult for candidates to project an image nationwide. Campaign rallies reach only about 10 per cent of the voters.

Political surveys are generally considered unreliable.

But they generally show the most popular candidate to be former garrison Reform Secretary Miriam Defensor Santiago, with former actor Sen Joseph Estrada, Ramos and Cojuangco close behind.

Off the Record

For refusing to go to heaven

RECKLEY, W. Va: A couple abandoned their 11-year-old daughter by the side of a highway after she refused to join them in committing suicide to be with God, police said Sunday, reports AP.

The girl was picked up by a clergyman who saw her on the highway, and the parents were later arrested, police said. Lorrie Wayne Cooper, 27, and Cassandra Cooper, 30, were charged Saturday with child abandonment and being fugitives from justice, said Virginia State Trooper D.P. Whittemore.

Their daughter, whose name was not released, was found on Interstate 77 near Rocky Gap Va near the West Virginia state line.

Immediately before they put her out, she says they told her they were going to the mountains to do away with themselves to be with the Lord, Whittemore said. They put her out with no shoes, a blanket, a couple Bibles and some of the mother's journals.

The girl's father left his driver's license and registration in a coat he gave to the girl, and West Virginia police captured the parents and the girl's 5-year-old brother, who was still with them, near Beckley, about 60 miles (100 kilometers) farther north, Whittemore said.

The boy was handed over to public child care officials, and the girl was released to the care of a relative, the trooper said.

The Coopers were returning with their children from a visit to those relatives when they began talking about a suicide pact, Whittemore said.

They asked her if she would go with them to heaven but she said no," he said. "Then they asked the little boy if he wanted to go with sister or go with them to heaven. He told the parents he wanted to go with them and they put the little girl out on the side of the road on the interstate."

Whittemore said the parents "were talking pretty crazy and asking for scriptural advice" during the visit. The parents, in the Raleigh County Jail, were not available for comment.

Love call to be heard again

MANILA: An extinct species of bird has been recently discovered by ornithologists in Mount Pulag, Benguet, some 300 kilometers Northwest of Manila, reports Xinhua.

The little bird with multi-hued plumage, called, "Kong-Kong" by the natives of the mountain due to its love calls to its mate, was identified as the "Kock Pitta" which was believed to have been extinct, according to the department of environment and natural resources.

The department said ornithologists in expeditions in that mountain area sighted several pairs of the bird which was last seen in European forest 50 years ago.

The 2,922 meter-high mountain was proclaimed as a national park in February 1987. Most of the 11,550 hectares covered are of a pristine wilderness untraveled for centuries.

She enthralled Puerto Rico

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico: Ivette Rodriguez couldn't make it in New York as a Latin. Now the Puerto Rican singer-actress is enthralled audiences at home with a hauntingly precise portrayal of a famed Parisian, reports AP.

She's starring in a new production of the life of Edith Piaf, the Paris street girl who became a worldwide sensation. Crafted by director-producer Frank Marrero, himself a Puerto Rican repatriate after 30 years in US television, the two-act musical, "La Piaf, The Musical," played to packed houses and elicited rave reviews during a recent run in San Juan. It's still playing in other Puerto Rican cities.

Box-office hits are rare in Puerto Rico, where the theater crowd is small and many a production shuts down after a single night. Rarer still are those that make the long leap from the island to international success.

"We knew we had a good show, but we didn't expect a collective explosion," Marrero said. Piaf died at 47, her spirit broken, but with thousands of adoring fans packing the street outside her room.

Rodriguez own life, while hardly as dramatic, has its own touches of irony.

Russia for Tatarstan to remain its part

KAZAN, Russia, Mar 23: President Boris Yeltsin's top lieutenant appealed to the rebel region of Tatarstan to remain part of Russia on Sunday after it voted in a referendum for self-rule, reports Reuter.

First Deputy Prime Minister Gennady Burbulis appealed to the oil-rich territory to sign an agreement later this month shaping new relations between Moscow and a score of mini-republics within the sprawling Russian federation. He indicated that Russia's government would tolerate no breakaway attempts by the ethnic regions, of which Tatarstan is the biggest and most powerful.

"We cannot allow ourselves to be indifferent to what is known as the territorial integrity of Russia," Burbulis said in an interview with Russian television.

In Tatarstan, a territory of 4.5 million people on the Volga river, nationalist leaders hailed the outcome of Saturday vote as a major break with "Russian colonialism."

The referendum is historically important not only for the people of Tatarstan, but for the (ethnic) peoples living in Tatarstan," Nationalists leader Marat Mulykov told reporters.

Opposition to self-rule was strong in Tatarstan's larger cities, where most ethnic Russians are concentrated. Nonetheless, the result was a blow for Russia, which had declared the referendum unconstitutional and said it would not recognise its results.

Tatarstan's ethnic mix includes 48 per cent Tatars and 42 per cent Russians.

BRIEFLY

Ghali may visit India: UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali is expected to visit India on April 21-22, according to local press reports Monday, Xinhua says from New Delhi.

He is expected to meet Indian leaders on the question of restructuring the UN secretariat.

India is concerned about the declining emphasis in the UN on development and calls for a restructuring of the world body.

Ghali visited India last year to canvass support for his candidacy.

Blacks urged to join talks: African National Congress President Nelson Mandela called on Sunday on militant black groups to join talks on ending apartheid, AP reports from Paarl.

Speaking to about 5,000 people in Paarl, near Cape Town, Mandela said the Pan Africanist Congress and the Azanian People's Organization should join the talks which began last December.

"We want unity, we want all black political organizations to speak with one voice, he said to cheers.

The PAC and Azapo have boycotted negotiations with the government, saying they are a tactic by the white-led government to extend apartheid. Nineteen black and white political organizations held their first round of negotiations December 20-21 and are expected to convene again in April.

Palestinian shot dead: Israeli troops shot dead a Palestinian in a clash near Tulkarm in the West Bank and a soldier was wounded elsewhere in the occupied territory on Sunday, the army said, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

In the Gaza strip meanwhile, military authorities lifted a ban on Palestinian residents entering Israel, Gaza was sealed off Friday, after a Palestinian from Gaza stabbed two Israelis to death and wounded 20 in Jaffa, northern Israel.

A military spokesman identified the dead Palestinian as Jamal Rashid, saying he was wanted in connection with attacks on soldiers and on Palestinians accused of collaborating with the Israeli authorities.

He was the 879th Palestinian killed by Israeli gunfire since the December 1987 outbreak of an uprising in the West Bank and Gaza strip, according to an AFP toll compiled from Arab reports.

One killed in prison riot: A seven-hour riot at a maximum-security prison outside Madrid left one prisoner dead Sunday, AP reports from Madrid.

The riot at the Alcala-Meco prison began at 9 am (0800 GMT) when two prisoners in the maximum security unit took a prison officer hostage, the national news agency EFE said.

The disturbance spread to other units with 60 inmates taking two more jailers hostage.

"We're doing this because of the injustices in the prison and because they're beating us every day," one of the rioters told EFE. Authorities said they suspected the dead inmate, who was not identified, might have been killed as an act of revenge unrelated to the riot.

Rally against racism in Belgium: Tens of thousands marched in rain and hail Brussels Sunday for democracy and against racism, AFP says from Brussels.

The demonstration "for democracy and tolerance, against exclusion and racism," was staged by several political and labour organizations in the wake of legislative elections last November.

Those elections installed extreme right-wing candidates in Flemish-speaking northern Belgium and tinged the rhetoric of some traditional parties with a note of xenophobia.

Police estimated the size of Sunday's turnout at 65,000. The organizers said there were about twice that.

US plane with 51 people crashes:

A US air commuter jet carrying 51 people crashed Sunday after an aborted takeoff in snowy weather at La Guardia airport, landing with its nose submerged in flushing bay. Police said at least 14 people died, AFP reports from New York.

Arab newsmen urged to stand against western threats

AMMAN, Mar 23: The Jordanian Writers' Association (JWA) has appealed to journalists and writers in Jordan and the Arab world to stand in unity against recent western threats against Iraq and Libya, "Jordan Times" reported yesterday, reports Xinhua.

In a statement, the association said the threats of military action were designed to "impose imperialist hegemony on the Arabs."

The United States and Britain have threatened to use military force against Iraq if it did not fully comply with UN resolutions calling for complete dismantling of its weapons of mass destruction and related facilities.

Iraq on Thursday avoided a showdown with the West and the United Nations by disclosing that it was more missiles and chemical weapons than it previously announced.

Real election campaign begins

Cory needs army help to transfer power



TIRANA: An Albanian woman votes during the legislative elections in Vaqarr. These second free elections in Albania, the poorest country in Europe, are expected to bring end of 45 years long communist rule. — AFP/UNB photo

Albania bids farewell to communism

TIRANA, Mar 23: Forty-six years of Communist government in Albania ended in Sunday's elections with the sweeping victory of the Democratic Party, its leader Sali Berisha said early today, reports AFP.

"Albania said good-bye to communism," he told journalists at the headquarters of his party. Diplomats had predicted that the opposition parties would obtain about 55 per cent of the vote, but Berisha, a cardiologist, said his party single handedly won between 60 and 65 per cent of the seats in the parliament.

If confirmed, the results will also mean good-bye to President Ramtz Alia, the last of the communist dictators of Eastern Europe.

AL rejects Libyan request

CAIRO, Mar 23: Arab foreign ministers on Sunday turned down a Libyan request that they reject proposed Western-backed economic sanctions against Libya for its alleged involvement in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, reports AP.

The foreign ministers, representing the 21-member Arab League, instead urged the United Nations to solve the crisis through mediation.

The December 1988 bombing of the Pan Am flight over Lockerbie, Scotland, killed 270 people. The United States and Britain are demanding the extradition of two

Libyans indicted in the case. Winding up its emergency session Sunday, the Arab League ministers adopted a resolution calling on the UN Security Council to "avoid taking any economic, military or diplomatic measures that could have negative consequences on the region."

The resolution said the Security Council should wait the outcome of International Court of Justice appeal filed by Libya on March 3.

The ministers reaffirmed their condemnation of all forms of terrorism and welcomed Libya's readiness to

cooperate with any international efforts to end this phenomenon.

They promised to exert efforts on all levels to avert any threats against Libya and try to solve the problem through peaceful means.

They established a follow-up ministerial committee comprising Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania and Arab League Secretary General Esmat Abdel-Meguid to find a solution for the crisis compatible with the UN Charter and principles of international law.

The emergency session of

the Arab League failed to mention the Western demand for handing over the suspects.

The session, attended by 12 Arab foreign ministers as well as junior representatives for the other members, met at the request of Libya to discuss how to avert the threat of proposed United Nations sanctions against Tripoli.

The proposed sanctions, expected to be adopted by the Security Council this week, call for a ban on air links with Libya, a halt to arms sales and expulsion of most Libyan diplomats from foreign countries.

Politicians wrangle with Thai generals

BANGKOK, Mar 23: Thailand's politicians began wrangling with the country's coup-prone generals today on a future coalition after an apparently inconclusive general election focussing on the military's role in government, reports Reuter.

Unofficial returns from Sunday's election, the first since a military coup in February 1991, suggested that pro-military parties would form the single largest bloc in parliament.

But voters also gave strong support to two parties which campaigned hard against the idea of appointing a non-elected military man as prime minister.

Junta leader General

Sunthorn Kongsompong, who has threatened to name a comrade-in-arms as prime minister, conferred early today with leaders of sympathetic political parties.

"The meeting is over. They left by the back door," an air force officer told reporters at air force headquarters at 0300 am.

Sunthorn has said he may ask the Army Chief and Supreme Military Commander, General Suchinda, Kraprayoon, to form a new government.

Student leaders vowed to take to the streets to prevent a general being named prime minister, but academic analysts said they believed the pro-military parties would have sufficient seats to form a government, albeit a weak one.



BANGKOK: Former Bangkok Governor Chamlong Srimuang, the "Mr Clean" of Thai politics, led his tiny Palang Dharma Party to a stunning victory in the capital in the general election of March 22. — AFP/UNB photo

Collapse of communism rouses dormant racism in new Europe

PARIS, Mar 23: The new Europe is much like the old for Gypsies, who are chased by mobs in Romania, vainly seek asylum in Germany and beg for change on the subways of Paris, reports AP.

Rather than opening a new era of tolerance, the collapse of communism roused dormant nationalism and racism in eastern Europe. Gypsies are fleeing the prejudice and violence by the tens of thousands, but often find life just as harsh in the West.

"The Gypsies want to move to Germany, Italy, France, Spain, which the mirages on TV depict as heavens of peace, as El Dorados," French sociologist Jacqueline Char Jemagne wrote in a new study. "But the hostility to the new arrivals grows stronger each day."

Some Gypsies apply for political asylum when they move west, but others avoid authorities altogether.

Gypsies have scattered across Europe since arriving from India 800 years ago and are unlike the continent's other minorities. They claim no territory as their own and do not have a single language or nationalist rhetoric.

"We are Europe's forgotten, excluded children," Agnes Daroczi, a Hungarian, said at a seminar in Paris of eastern European Gypsy leaders. "We want to live as well as other Europeans, without giving up our uniqueness."

clean, rootless life. In Nantur, near Paris, local officials and residents tried to help 300 Gypsies who set up a shabby settlement along the Seine. Social workers soon complained that the children wouldn't stay in school and that adults given jobs often quit within days.

"We learned very quickly that the Gypsies weren't ready to accept our value system and make the necessary efforts to assimilate," said Gerard Neveu, a social services official. "They don't want a fixed job."

An estimated 5 million to 6 million Gypsies live in Europe, about two-thirds in the eastern countries. Many refer to themselves as Roms or Romany people.

Most are seminomadic, living in wagons or mobile homes, practicing their centuries-old trades of horse dealing, metalworking and fortune telling. Others congregate in urban slums, where they suffer infant mortality and illiteracy rates among the highest in Europe.

In western Europe, Gypsy communities generally are viewed as nuisances, potential sources of petty crime.

The situation is much worse in eastern Europe. The Gypsy leaders who met in Paris said level of discrimination and racial violence recalled the Nazi era, when an estimated half-million Gypsies were killed.

condemned," said Nicolas Gheorghe, a Romanian Gypsy and respected sociologist. "Gypsies have been the scapegoat when there's economic tension."

In Romania, mobs have attacked Gypsy neighborhoods in several towns, burning scores of families out of their homes. Gypsies have been massacred in Czechoslovakia and attacked by skinheads in Hungary.

Although Gypsies received little or no legal recognition under communism, they generally were protected from overt racial harassment. Now, they say, animosity is expressed openly.

In a survey conducted in November by Median, a Hungarian polling organization, 76 per cent of respondents said they would not want Gypsies in their neighbourhoods.

"The situation could be described as tragic," said Ms Daroczi, citing a 60 per cent unemployment rate among Gypsies in Hungary. "Because of the lack of alternatives, crime and suicides and drug use can't help but increase."

President Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia has denounced anti-Gypsy violence, suggesting post-communist societies seek scapegoats because "they cannot cope with their own freedom."

Hungary promises Gypsies equal rights with other minorities, "but there are difficulties in granting them equal treatment," said Bela Bogdan of the government minorities office. "They don't have a written language, which is

an obstacle to teaching them in their own language."

France's attitude is somewhat contradictory. Various groups espouse the Gypsy cause and Premier Edith Cresson gave Romanian Gypsy leaders a human rights award, but police on anti-pickpocket duty chase Gypsies away from the Eiffel Tower on sight.

France's refugee agency deals with applications for asylum case by case. Some Gypsy refugees are allowed to stay and others are deported.

In Rome, Gypsies have a notorious reputation as pickpockets. Some Romans scream when they see young Gypsies on a bus and demand they get off.

Youths under 15 aren't prosecuted, so offenders return to the streets after a scolding from police. The Italian government has said it will expel any immigrants involved in crime, including Gypsies.

Terrible hygienic conditions have been reported at temporary centers for Gypsies in Germany. In some towns, they have been greeted by stone-throwing.

Still, the flight west continues. A Gypsy publication in Romania gave this explanation: "Perhaps it is no better there, but at least you can nourish the hope that it is up to you alone to maintain your dignity."

Fresh fighting in Croatia

BELGRADE, Mar 23: Croatian and Serbian forces fought with mortars and artillery in several areas of Croatia in advance of the arrival of United Nations peace-keeping troops to separate the warring parties, reports Reuter.

But the most serious clashes between the rival groups were reported on Sunday from the neighbouring republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where UN forces will not be deployed.

Croatian radio said two Serb soldiers were captured and others were killed in fighting near Neum, the only town on Bosnia-Herzegovina's 15-km (10 miles) stretch of Adriatic coast.

It also said Croatian and Muslim villagers fled Serbian shelling of a mountain plateau a few miles (km) inland.

The Serbian-based Tanjug news agency said Croatian forces opened fire with machineguns, assault rifles and mortars on Yugoslav army.