

Havel returns to power

PRAGUE, Feb 3: Vaclav Havel was inaugurated Tuesday as the Czech Republic's first president, and warned that his return to power did not mean a return to the upheaval he led in post-Communist Czechoslovakia, reports AP.

The parliaments of the Czech Republic and Slovakia approved new currencies for their lands to begin February 8, in a further step dividing the two republics.

Havel, who was once Communist Czechoslovakia's leading dissident, became its president in December 1989 after communism gave way to democracy. But he resigned in July after he was unable to prevent his country's breakup.

Last week, he easily won election in the Czech parliament as president of the new Czech Republic, which split from Slovakia on January 1. It was an office he had never wanted to exist.

After his inauguration, Havel made it clear that the renewal of his leadership would not lead to the exciting upheaval he led as president of post-Communist Czechoslovakia.

"The revolutionary times are over," Havel, 56, said in an address from a balcony at Prague's Hradcany Castle, the presidential residence.



BAGHDAD: President Saddam Hussain (L) chats with PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat on Tuesday. —AFP/UNB photo

US sticks to hardline policy towards Iraq

WASHINGTON, Feb 3: The United States on Tuesday welcomed Iraq's recent halt in violations of two allied no-fly zones over that country, but did not signal any change in the Clinton administration's hardline policy towards Baghdad, reports Reuter.

"The Iraqis have changed their behaviour," Defence Department spokesman Bob Hall told reporters. "We certainly think it's the right thing for them to do."

Iraq has been using the new Clinton administration to try to break out of its isolation after the Gulf War, which destroyed much of its military might. Last month Baghdad declared a unilateral ceasefire as a goodwill gesture to President Bill Clinton.

Hall said in response to questions that Iraq had not used target-acquisition radars or fired on US and allied planes policing no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq since January 23, when a US jet dropped bombs on a suspected anti-aircraft gun site in the southern zone.

"There has been no radar that has threatened allied aircraft," said Hall, adding that no Iraqi warplanes had challenged the zones set up by the western powers to protect Kurds in northern Iraq and Shi'ites in the south.

"What has changed here is the Iraqi behaviour," he stressed when pressed on whether Clinton might be softening his demand that Pre-sident Saddam Hussein comply with UN Gulf War ceasefire agreements.

Hall said that Iraq was still not in compliance with UN resolutions after the 1991 Gulf War and had not yet destroyed all of its weapons of mass destruction.

UN stops relief work in parts of Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, Feb 3: The United Nations on Wednesday withdrew its international staff from eastern and southern Afghanistan after gunmen attacked a UN convoy, killing four aid workers, reports AP.

No one has claimed responsibility for Monday's attack in which the convoy was raked with machine gun fire about 15 kilometres (10 miles) outside the eastern city of Jalalabad.

In Geneva, UN officials said it was the worst attack against a UN operation in Afghanistan since 1989.

The victims were identified as Tony Bullard, a British citizen who worked for the UN Centre for Human Settlements, JA Van Hoeflaken, a Dutch engineer consulting on a water resources project, and their Afghan drivers, Abdul Haidi and Zia Ahmed.

A fifth person, Reinout Wanrooy, an Argentine working for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, escaped unharmed by leaping from his vehicle and hiding in the bushes until the gunmen left.

"He is still suffering from the after effects of this traumatic experience," said Hugh Hudson, UNHCR spokesman in Islamabad.

Monday's attack was the second in as many weeks against UN workers struggling to dispense aid in a country ravaged by 14 years of war and battered by bitter feuding among Muslim insurgents who ousted Afghanistan's Communist rulers last April.

Last month, gunmen ambushed a convoy of UNHCR and World Food Programme workers outside the village of Spinboldak in southern Kandahar province, said Hudson.

The vehicles were stolen and the UN employees "told to find their own way home," he said.

Hudson refused to speculate who may be behind the attacks.

The 10 major rebel factions ruling Afghanistan are bitterly divided along ethnic, religious and tribal lines and each has its own concept of what constitutes an Islamic state.

Saddam holds talks with Arafat

BAGHDAD, Feb 3: President Saddam Hussein held talks with PLO chief Yasser Arafat on Tuesday, reportedly on PLO moves to improve relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, reports AP.

Saddam called on Arafat, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, at his state guest house, the Iraqi News Agency reported.


The two were shown on television Tuesday night, smiling broadly as they embraced and kissed each other on the cheeks and then sitting and chatting.

Arafat, a longtime supporter of Saddam, is the only major Arab leader to meet Saddam since the 1991 Gulf War. He last visited Baghdad in January 1992. He had planned a visit last summer, but fell ill.

Baghdad radio reported that Saddam awarded Arafat a "Mother of Battles" medal for Palestinian support in the Gulf War two years ago. Saddam was cheered by many Palestinians when he launched Scud missiles at Israel during the war.

Woolsey Clinton's nominee for CIA director

WASHINGTON, Feb 3: James Woolsey, President Bill Clinton's choice to become director of central intelligence, warned Congress on Tuesday against slashing the sprawling US spy apparatus even though the Soviet Union has collapsed, reports Reuter.



Woolsey said the death of the former Soviet Union meant parts of the estimated 29 billion dollar a year intelligence community could be streamlined after careful study.

But he said serious threats to US security had grown in the post-cold war world, and that these were often "harder to observe and understand" than the former Soviet threat.

"Yes, we have slain a large dragon. But we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes."

And in many ways, the dragon was easier to keep track of," Woolsey said at his confirmation hearing.

Woolsey, 51, is a Washington lawyer, former Under Secretary of the Navy and Arms Control Negotiator who has served both Democratic and Republican presidents.

He made his comments before the Senate select committee on intelligence, whose 17 members made clear that he had strong bipartisan support.

In his opening statement to the panel, Woolsey said the attack outside the CIA gate was a reminder of the "great contributions by, and the substantial risks to, intelligence professionals."

Off the Record

He prefers lesbian

WASHINGTON: A radical lesbian activist was named Tuesday to a top Housing post in the US administration, the first openly homosexual person to be nominated for a high-ranking government position, reports AP.

President Bill Clinton's decision to name Roberta Achtenberg comes less than a week after he found himself embroiled in a political storm after trying to lift a ban on gays in the armed forces.

Following the outcry the President was forced to compromise, easing the ban rather than lifting it.

Achtenberg, a member of the San Francisco City Council, was appointed by Clinton to be assistant secretary for fair housing and equal opportunity, the No.3 position in the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

17000 chickens starve to death

TOKYO: A poultry farmer has been arrested on suspicion of starving 17,000 chickens to death because he couldn't afford to keep them, police said Wednesday, reports AP.

Police identified the farmer as Seitaro Kawakami, 44, of Akasaki, a town of 9,500 people some 800 kilometres (500 miles) west of Tokyo.

A police official said Kawakami told investigators that he abandoned his hen house with about 19,000 chickens inside in early January because of financial difficulties stemming from low egg prices.

Kawakami then moved to the house of a friend, where he was taken into custody Tuesday on suspicion of violating the Animal Protection Law, the official said. If found guilty, Kawakami would face a fine of 30,000 yen (US\$240).

Of the 19,000 chickens, 17,000 starved and were buried Tuesday after a brief memorial service in Akasaki, a town official said. A local agricultural research institute has taken in the remaining 2,000 chickens and put them in its hen house.

White House no-smoking zone

WASHINGTON: President Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, have declared the White House a no-smoking zone, reports Reuter.

The edict is the latest example of how health-conscious America has become.

After all, presidents once were chosen in "smoke-filled rooms" and several of Clinton's predecessors, such as cigar-chomping Teddy Roosevelt and even Clinton's idol, John Kennedy, were known to light up from time to time.

Clinton's spokesman George Stephanopoulos said there was no area of the White House exempt from the new rule, which was announced by Mrs. Clinton in an interview published on Tuesday in the New York Times.

"I think it's everywhere," Stephanopoulos said of the ban. "There's no smoking in the White House. I think it speaks for itself."

BRIEFLY

Ghali makes some changes in UN:

Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali made leadership changes Tuesday in the United Nations' peacekeeping and political affairs departments, says AP from United Nations.

Kofi Annan of Ghana, assistant secretary-general for peacekeeping operations, will take charge of peacekeeping operations around the globe beginning March 1.

Annan replaces Marrack Goulding of Britain, who will become undersecretary-general for political affairs. The official occupying that spot until the changes take effect March 1 is Vladimir Petrovsky of Russia, who will become director-general of the UN office in Geneva.

US to treat Bosnian war victims:

The US Air Force on Tuesday began flying victims of the Bosnian civil war to the United States for specialized medical care, the Pentagon announced, reports AP from Washington.

Bob Hall, a Pentagon spokesman, said the first flight, with eight patients aboard, flew from Zagreb to the US Army's Landstuhl Regional Medical Centre in Germany on Tuesday for an overnight stay.

They were to arrive aboard an Air Force C-141 aircraft at Andrews Air Force Base, Md, just south of Washington, on Wednesday afternoon. From there they were to be taken to civilian hospitals for reconstructive surgery, Hall said.

Hall said the Air Force expects to conduct one such flight every two weeks.

Rebels kill 10 Lankan soldiers:

Tamil rebels shot and killed 10 soldiers during a battle in the jungles outside a military camp in northern Sri Lanka, officials said Wednesday, reports AP from Colombo.

At least five guerrillas also were killed in the fighting Tuesday, the military officials said.

Troops recovered automatic rifles lying beside the bodies of the five militants, said the officials, who cannot be identified under briefing rules. They said some other attackers fled after the exchange of fire near Madagal town.

The area is in Jaffna district, a stronghold of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which has been fighting since 1983 to set up an independent Tamil homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

Miami customs agent held:

A Customs agent responsible for investigating counterfeit trademark products was arrested Tuesday on charges of trafficking in the goods and laundering the profits, reports AP from Miami.

Last week, one FBI and three Customs agents were arrested in a similar case on charges including money laundering and stealing from drug dealers.

Customs agent Paul Arzola, 32, was arrested in a sting set up by Customs, according to Leonard Freeman, regional director of the agency's internal affairs office.

Roman Catholic shot dead:

Two unidentified gunmen shot to death a Roman Catholic nun Tuesday night at his home in the village of Ballyronan, police said, AP reports from Belfast.

Police did not immediately name the man. No one immediately claimed responsibility.

Residents of Ballyronan, about 40 miles (66 kms) west of Belfast, told the Associated Press the victim was Victor Eugene Martin, unemployed and single in his mid-20s.

Witnesses said the gunman went to his home about 8 pm (2000 GMT) and opened fire, killing him instantly, then fled in a waiting car.

Russian diplomat visits DPRK:

North Korea and Russia disagreed repeatedly over international issues during a top Russian diplomat's visit to Pyongyang that ended Monday, the North's official media said Wednesday, AP reports from Tokyo.

The Korean Central News Agency, monitored in Tokyo, did not specify the disagreements during the four-day visit by Russian Vice Foreign Minister Georgi Kunadze.

It quoted North Korea's vice foreign minister, Kang Sok Ju, as saying the "differences of views on a series of international issues... are nothing strange" in the light of the present changed situation in Russia.

Moscow, a longtime supporter of North Korea, cut off aid to Pyongyang after opening diplomatic ties with the North's capitalist rival, South Korea, in 1990. It has also called an end to barter trade with the North and demanded payment in hard currency.

Taiwan fire kills seven:

Fire swept through a video parlour in northern Taiwan late on Tuesday, killing seven people and injuring three, police said, reports Reuter from Taipei.

The blaze broke out at the Crazy Horse video parlour in a six-storey building in the city of Hsinchu shortly before midnight, a police spokesman said yesterday.

Firefighters found three bodies after putting out the blaze two hours later, he said. Four other people died on their way to or after arrival at hospitals.

The cause of the blaze is being investigated. Damage was estimated at Taiwan 5 million dollar (US 200,000 dollar).

Deportees reject Israeli offer for partial return

MAJAL AL-ZAITIYAH, Feb 3: About 400 Palestinians stranded for six weeks in frigid weather in south Lebanon are rejecting an offer by Israel to take back 100 of them, as well as offers of aid by helicopter, reports AP.

"None of us accepts to go piecemeal," Dr. Abdul-Aziz Rantisi, a spokesman for the Palestinians, said Tuesday. "It's either a wholesale return... or we shall stay on here."

Arab leaders have insisted that Middle East peace talks be suspended until Israel obeys a UN Security Council demand that all the exiles be returned to their homes in Israeli-occupied territories.

Officials from the Palestine Liberation Organization said they would press for UN sanctions on Israel and continue to boycott the peace talks until all the deportees are repatriated.

Although Lebanese Foreign Minister Fariss Bwiz credited the Clinton administration with "a positive beginning" by helping arrange the Israeli offer, he said he expected Washington to maintain efforts to the deportees full return. Other Arab nations made similar calls.

Bassam Abu Sharif, an adviser to PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, criticized Washington for supporting the Israeli government's compromise offer on the deportees.

"We hope the Clinton administration will not let Israel behave as a state above international law," said Abu Sharif.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's government made the offer Monday to allow 100 deported Palestinians to return immediately from Lebanon, and cut in half the two-year exile period for nearly 300 others, Israel also offered to permit aid shipments to the men by the helicopter.

The 394 deportees voted on the offer at the frigid tent camp where they have lived since being ejected December 17 by Israel, which accuses them of links to militant Muslim fundamentalist groups.

After noon prayers, they assembled in rows facing television cameras. When asked by a leader how many rejected the offer, all raised their hands.

Ahmed Ali Ahmed, 45, a clergyman for the West Bank town of Nablus, said accepting the partial return would be like digging a hole in our ship.



Some of the Palestinians expelled by Israel last December play in the snow in their camp in Marj Ej Zouhour on Tuesday. —AFP/UNB photo

Gen Lekwot, five others to die for massacre

LAGOS, Feb 3: A retired Christian army general was sentenced to death Tuesday by a controversial tribunal that found him guilty of leading a massacre of 1,800 Muslims. The decision could spark new religious riots, reports AP.

The special court found Gen Zamani Lekwot, 54, and five other Christian leaders guilty of two charges of culpable homicide and sentenced them to death by hanging. A seventh man was acquitted.

Lekwot was military governor of Southern River state before retiring from the army in 1985. Eight policemen testified that they found him with pistol in hand in the northern town of Zangan Kataf on May 16 when they halted a two-day Christian riot.

Taiwan's PM and his cabinet resign

TAIPEI, Feb 3: Premier Hau Pei-tsun, an old guard nationalist conservative, and his entire Cabinet resigned Wednesday amid calls for growing democratization in Taiwan, reports AP.

But the moves failed to resolve a widening rift within the governing party between Taiwan-born liberals and conservatives who retreated to Taiwan following the Nationalist defeat in mainland China in 1949.

As a result, the ruling Nationalist Party's decision-making Central Standing Committee did not name a successor to Hau after approving the resignations of the 73-year-old former four-star general and his 18 Cabinet ministers.

President Lee Teng-hui, who presided over the committee meeting, said in a terse statement, "We admire Premier Hau's contributions to our country" in his nearly three years as head of the Cabinet.

Lee's plans to reshuffle the Cabinet have triggered an unprecedented internal power struggle.

Liberals want to see a faster pace of democracy on this affluent island and less attachment to China. Old guard conservatives like Hau prefer the status quo and dream of reunification with the mainland.

Before Hau offered to resign last week, he suggested that he be succeeded by one of his supporters, Lin Yang-Kang, president of the Judicial Yuan, Taiwan's chief judiciary.

Deluge claims 51 in Java

JAKARTA, Feb 3: Monsoon rains lashed the densely populated Indonesian island of Java today in a week-old deluge of fatalities has killed at least 51 people and destroyed thousands of hectares of rice fields.

"According to the latest reports we have from some districts in central Java, 51 people were killed and 165,378 evacuated from their homes," a provincial official told Reuters by phone.

The Jakarta Post daily quoted a government meteorologist as saying rains and strong winds could continue until March or April.

The monsoon storms have swept through the other islands in the Indonesian archipelago but Java appears to be the worst hit.

They actually wanted Muslim women to give birth to Chetnik

SARAJEVO, Feb 3: The following statement was given by a 30-year-old Muslim woman — a mother of two young children — to the Bosnian government's state commission on war crimes, reports AP.

Her name and other details have been omitted to protect her identity.

"At the beginning of May 1992, at around 4.00 am, Chetniks (Serb militia men) arrived in our Muslim village of 15 houses.

"I recognised some of the Chetniks — they were from neighbouring Serb villages in the 'xxxxx' area.

"Amongst them were some men I did not know. In fact, they were armed with machine-guns, hand grenades and knives.

"They were speaking in Ekavica (a Serbian dialect), so we knew they were from (the republic of) Serbia.

"They came in JNA (Federal Yugoslav Army) trucks, and as soon as they arrived they started searching the houses.

"As they searched the houses, they maltreated us.

"None of the inhabitants had any weapons."

"After the search was over, we were split into groups — women and children on one side, old men on the other.

"The younger women were taken to the camp at 'xxxxx'.

"The camp was in the 'xxxxx' elementary school.

"They took me and two Serb women from my village, but released the other two as soon as they realised they were Serbs.

"There were 13 of us women in the camp, and some 400 to 500 men (prisoners). All of us were Muslim.

"I was there from May to September under impossible conditions.

"I was taken out twice each evening.

"I was maltreated, beaten and threatened.

"They aimed guns at me while I was being raped.

"Some five or six men would rape all of us in one night.

"Among other men, some of those who raped us were: (A list of seven names).

"After I realised had become pregnant, I asked them to allow me to visit a doctor to have an abortion.

"They did not allow that, saying they actually wanted Muslim women to give birth to Chetniks.

"While they said that, they were singing songs against Muslims and Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic.

"When I was seven months pregnant, they exchanged all women.

"Twelve of us were in an advanced stage of pregnancy — only the six-year-old girl was not.

"Her name was 'xxxxxx', and she was from 'xxxxxx'.

"She was raped also.

"When that happened, we all cried terribly.

"During our captivity, we had to do everything we were ordered.

"We were given one slice of bread and one cup of tea per day.

"Men were heavily beaten — we would hear the screams from the neighbouring rooms.

"The men were forced to dig trenches and do other hard manual jobs.

"Around September 10 or 15, 13 of us were released and taken by truck to 'xxxxx'.

"Among the women, there was one 14-year-old girl, two 17-year-old and one 13-year-old.

"The others were either young girls or girls up to the age of 18.

"During my captivity, many of the male detainees were killed.

"I myself saw many of them being killed in the school. I knew some of them, but I can't remember their names.

"We were not allowed any movement except to go to the toilet and the room where they raped us.

"Three of the men among the worst of the criminals were called: (list of names).

"As soon as I arrived in 'xxxxx' (a Bosnian government held city) I went to a doctor, asking him to help me have an abortion.

"I wanted to get rid of my unwanted baby even though there was a danger I might die.

"I am ready to repeat this statement in front of all state authorities, courts and commissions, as well as before the International Court (of Justice) and international commissions.

Guzman to be transferred to more secure jail

LIMA, Feb 3: Jailed Shining Path rebel founder Abimael Guzman will be transferred to a more secure prison to serve out his life sentence in Lima, President Alberto Fujimori said Tuesday, reports AP.

But the President would not disclose where in the capital Guzman, 58, would be imprisoned.

"It is the government's responsibility to take the necessary steps and precautions so that this criminal does not escape on, Fujimori said.

"He is being guarded well, but we want to have him watched over more closely in a place where there definitely can be no possibility of his getting away," added Fujimori.