

LTTE wants UN to probe Kittu's death

COLOMBO, Feb 12: Tamil Tiger guerrillas have asked the United Nations to investigate the death of a rebel leader in a clash with the Indian navy, reports AP.

The Tigers accused India of violating international law when a coastal vessel intercepted a rebel ship in international waters carrying the guerrilla leader, Sathasivam Krishnakumar.

Krishnakumar, who was known as Kittu when he served as the group's spokesman in London, was on a peace mission to Jaffna, the Tigers' stronghold on northern Sri Lanka, the rebels claimed. He and nine other rebels were killed January 16.

India said the Tigers blew up their own ship and committed suicide after they were surrounded by naval boats off the Indian port of Madras.

Nine crewmen jumped into the sea and were rescued.

The Tigers said in a petition to the United Nations that the action by the Indian navy was a war crime intended to sabotage peace initiatives.

They called for a special committee to investigate and to recommend sanctions against India.

Kittu was the commander of Jaffna until he lost a leg in a bomb explosion in 1987. He flew to London to be fitted with an artificial leg and set up a political office. He was expelled in 1991 and resurfaced in Switzerland.

Over 17,500 people have been killed since 1983 when rebels from the minority Tamil Community started a violent campaign for an independent homeland in the north and east.

Israel launches house-to-house search thru' Gaza Strip

TUNIS, Feb 12: Heavily-armed Israeli troops backed by helicopters have launched a house-to-house search through the occupied Gaza Strip, PLO chief Yasser Arafat said Thursday, reports AFP.

He said Israeli troops armed with automatic weapons, mortars and explosives and backed by helicopters had since Wednesday night been combing through the territory, a stronghold of Muslim fundamentalism and Anti-Israeli resistance.

Arafat described the alleged operation as "officially organized terrorism" and a "war crime," and said the United States was fully to blame for supporting Israeli policies.

He charged that the United States had worsened the situation by working out a compromise for Israel to reduce the term of exile of the others.

In exchange Washington would block sanctions against Israel after it refused to comply with U.N Security Council Resolution 799 ordering the return of all the men.

Israel expelled 415 Palestinian Muslim fundamentalist suspects to Lebanon on December 17. Many of them are from the Gaza Strip.

The United States has to take the blame for all that is going on now," Arafat told a news conference at the Palestine Liberation Organisation headquarters in Tunis.

The PLO chairman said he would send "urgent messages" on the Israeli operation to the Security Council, the European Community, the Arab League and the organisation of African unity.

"The patience of our people has limits," he warned.

He accused Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of "escalating repression" against the Palestinians in a bid to "destroy the peace process by normalising relations with the Arabs while bypassing the rights of the Palestinians."

Their was no immediate word from Israel on the operation in Gaza.

Reuters adds: U.S Secretary of State Warren Christopher wants Arab-Israeli peace talks to resume in March rather than wait until mid-April after the Muslim Ramadan and the Jewish Passover. U.S officials

and diplomats said on Thursday.

But Christopher, who embarks on his first trip to the Middle East next week, still faces a tough task in persuading Palestinians to return to the negotiations, the officials said.

In a series of talks between U.S officials and Israeli and Palestinian negotiators it has become clear that the United States has no intention of pushing Israel to make further concessions on the deportees issue.

"They are trying to persuade us to put the deportee issue behind us and shift the focus to the peace talks. We told them bluntly it just won't fly," said one Palestinian source.

Off the Record

Queen biggest tax dodger

LONDON: The announcement that Queen Elizabeth would pay tax on her personal income but not on assets she leaves to her successor drew criticism on Friday with one newspaper calling her Britain's biggest tax dodger, reports Reuter.

Prime Minister John Major announced on Thursday that the Queen, often described as the world's richest woman, would pay tax according to normal rules.

But the British press, which estimated her tax bill to be about two million pounds (2.8 million dollars), criticised the agreement.

"HM the tax dodger," said the Daily Mirror. "How the queen avoided paying millions in taxes," read a headline in today newspaper.

"It is chicken feed compared to the 1,000 million pounds (1.4 billion dollars) that the government is borrowing every day," Mike Warburton, head of tax at accountants Grant Thornton, told the Daily Express.

"She has hit the jackpot on inheritance tax. And she can avoid capital gains tax by switching her investments before April," he added.



Tallest man, smallest car

ISLAMABAD: Can you believe the tallest man in the world drives the smallest car yes, it is true, reports APP.

Since the tallest man has the smallest car — A Suzuki, his extra ordinary height does not allow him to sit comfortably in it.

"As the car does not provide enough leg room, I have to literally fold myself to get in the car, which is not only painful, but also hurts my fractured joint," says a visibly worried Alam Channa.

Earlier, this problem was solved to a certain extent, when former president late Gen. Zia-Ul-Haq donated him a Toyota car. The car unfortunately got damaged in a road accident in 1988. Alam Channa was seriously injured in the mishap, and had to undergo surgery for his fractured hip bone.

Seven feet eight inches tall Alam Channa, may not be a Gulliver in the land of Lilliputians, but he certainly is the tallest man on earth as acknowledged by the Guinness Book of World Record 1992.

Sometimes he vomited seeing his father

NEW YORK: Music superstar Michael Jackson said on Wednesday that as a child he was so afraid of his abusive father he would sometimes vomit just seeing him, reports Reuter.

In a televised interview with talk show hostess Oprah Winfrey, Jackson, one of nine children, said his strict father used to beat him and "there were times when I saw him that I would regurgitate [out of fear]."

Winfrey said it was the first interview Jackson, 34, had given in 14 years. It was held at the 2,700-acre (1,125 hectare) Neverland valley ranch in California's Santa Ynez valley where the singer lives.

In the wide-ranging interview, Jackson sought to dispel endless rumours about cosmetic surgery, face lifts, his sexuality and allegations he bleached his skin.

Jackson said he looked fair because he suffered from vitiligo, which destroys the pigmentation of the skin.

"It's something I cannot help" he said, explaining he inherited the condition from his father.



PHILADELPHIA: US First Lady Hillary Clinton (C) accompanied by the vice president's wife, Tipper Gore, talks on Thursday with Donald Diem (L) and Jim Howell (R) at the Saint Agnes Medical Centre. The two patients participated in the occupational therapy class.

Clinton to cut 'space station' budget by 40 pc

WASHINGTON, Feb 12: President Clinton's new budget will slash spending for a planned space station by 40 per cent, a newspaper reported Friday, says AP.

The Washington Post, citing unidentified key Capitol Hill aides and others close to the programme, reported that the White House had approved 1.35 billion dollar for the project in fiscal year 1994 instead of the 2.25 billion dollar that NASA had sought.

The Post said the cut was negotiated by the administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Daniel Goldin, and White House economic officials as a way to fend off threatened termination of the project.

NASA has spent 8 billion dollar on the troubled programme in nine years and has had to battle for funding each year with Congress.

300 Egyptian fundamentalists arrested

CAIRO, Feb 12: Egyptian security forces on Thursday rounded up nearly 300 people in a fresh sweep against Muslim extremists and arrested a key fundamentalist after a spate of attacks on police and tourists, police said, reports AFP.

A total of 400 people have been detained or arrested since last Thursday when fundamentalists hurled petrol bombs at a tourist bus on the road to the Pyramids in Cairo, wounding three South Koreans.

The attack was claimed by the underground Jamaa Islamiya.

On Tuesday, gunmen sprayed another tourist bus in Southern Egypt with automatic weapons fire, shattering the rear windows. German holiday makers aboard the vehicle escaped unhurt.

Thai govt firm to allow Dalai Lama to visit Bangkok

BANGKOK, Feb 12: The Thai government is standing firm against strong Chinese pressure on its decision to allow the Dalai Lama to visit Bangkok next week to join a campaign for the release of Myanmar opposition leader Aung Sun Suu Kyi, reports AFP.

In his turn the Tibetan spiritual leader, whose previous invitations to visit Thailand in 1987 and 1990 were cancelled under Chinese pressure, has made it clear that he will adopt a low profile and concentrate solely on the mission at hand.

He will stay in a Bangkok monastery, attend no press conference sources in the government say, see no government figures during his brief stay February 16-17.

Kuwait supports Indian stand over Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Feb 12: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber urged India on Thursday to rebuild the Babri Mosque razed by Hindu fanatics in December, saying the move would soothe the feelings of Muslims, reports AP.

Al-Ahmed, who arrived here Wednesday to mend strained ties, also ruled out mediation between India and Pakistan on their dispute over Kashmir.

Speaking of Kashmir, he endorsed India's stand on settlement of the dispute with Pakistan through a 1972 bilateral peace accord, and not through third-party mediation.

"We feel that India and Pakistan can settle the Kashmir issue through the Simla accord," al-Sabah said.

India, which holds the southern two-thirds of divided Kashmir, has fought two of its three wars with Pakistan over the issue since 1947. Currently it is trying to put down a raging Muslim secessionist drive in the state.

The Kuwaiti minister told a news conference that a Kuwaiti delegation would soon visit India to explore investment prospects.

Speaking of the demolition of the mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, Al-Ahmed said Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao should honour his commitment to rebuild the Shrine. "The rebuilding of the mosque would be beneficial to Muslims living both in India and abroad," he said.

Nearly 2,000 people died in Hindu-Muslim religious violence in India after the mosque demolition and the strife spread to Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Al-Ahmed, who was to leave for Turkey later Thursday, said his country "denounced the forces of communalism and extremism".

Al-Ahmed met President Shankar Dayal Sharma on Thursday and handed over a message from the Kuwait Emir asking India to urge the United Nations to make Iraq comply with all Security Council resolutions.

Al-Ahmed, the first Kuwaiti Foreign Minister to visit India since the Gulf crisis, also met Rao and Indian Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh.

India has traditionally been an ally of Iraq and took a stand favouring Baghdad shortly after it occupied Kuwait in August 1990. India later threw its support behind the US-led coalition which pushed Iraqi troops out of Kuwait.

Russia to build N-power plants in Iran, China

MOSCOW, Feb 12: Russia will construct nuclear power plants in Iran and China as it expands its role in the world atomic energy market, a senior official said Thursday, reports AP.

Deputy Atomic Energy Minister Viktor Sidorenko said negotiations with Iran have entered a final stage. As part of the deal, Iran will pledge to abide by international nuclear non-proliferation agreements, he said.

The Iranians have chosen an improved version of the Soviet-designed VVER pressurized-water reactor for their power plant, he said. The design of the reactors will be based on VVERs operating at

the nuclear power plant in Lovisa, Finland, Sidorenko said.

The VVER reactors fail to meet Western safety standards, according to US nuclear experts. But the reactors in Finland have been made safer with Western technology.

Sidorenko said the plant's spent nuclear fuel can be used to produce fission material for nuclear weapons. But he dismissed fears of possible nuclear proliferation.

"Iran will place it under international supervision, in accordance with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty... which is the starting condition for all this joint activity," Sidorenko said.

Russia has also concluded an initial agreement with China to construct two modernized VVER reactors there, and the two sides are now discussing technical details of the project, Sidorenko said.

Every Indian is at risk of AIDS epidemic

any projections for rural India. It says there is no information about the sexual habits of the 95 million sexually-active Indians between 15 and 45 years who live in villages.

Officially, only 10,856 Indians are HIV-positive. But critics say the figures do not reflect the reality.

Top Indian virologist Jacob John believes some 2.5 million may be HIV-infected, while India's AIDS control chief PR Das Gupta thinks the epidemic has reached a stage where every Indian is at risk if he or she is not careful.

International studies show that India is likely to have a million cases of full-blown AIDS by the year 2000, more than twice as much as

Thailand whose sex industry has received considerably more attention.

The HIV epidemic in India is following the African pattern because the same co-factors are spreading the disease in the two regions," says IS Oflada, founder and head of the Bombay-based Indian Health Organisation.

"The chief co-factor is unprotected sex without condoms in Indian brothels," he explains. "Prostitutes and their clients are infecting and getting infected by one another, and the clients are infecting wives who give birth to infected babies."

India's port city of Bombay gives a glimpse of how the scourge is spreading. The city

has an estimated 100,000 sex workers and HIV-incidence among them has jumped from two per cent to four per cent in just three years.

Reports from elsewhere in India indicate the infection is spreading rapidly among prostitutes even in hinterland towns.

To complicate matters, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) that aid the transfer of the AIDS virus, are rampant among India's sex workers. Oflada estimates that 80 per cent of the women are suffering from and STD at any given time.

Further, condoms which can protect sex workers from HIV are seldom used by clients in brothels.

them away, they go to another that has no HIV-testing facility," says M.L. Gupta, director of the Indian Red Cross, "the horrifying truth is that most of India's blood banks don't have diagnostic kit to screen blood."

One heartening feature of AIDS-control efforts, is the sprouting up of scores of volunteer groups that are fanning out to teach safe-sex practices to sex workers and their clients.

In Bombay, Oflada's team visit brothels every day. Some 3,000 women are now insisting that their clients use the condoms that are distributed free.

But this effort is only a drop in the ocean. Elsewhere, clients refuse to use condoms, and if women insist, they go off to others who are ready for unprotected sex.

Algeria offers partial amnesty to rebels

ALGIERS, Feb 12: The Algerian government offered a partial amnesty on Thursday to Muslim fundamentalist guerrillas who surrender and collaborate with the security forces, reports Reuter.

Prime Minister Abdessalam Belaid also offered a full amnesty for fundamentalists, "implicated in acts of terrorism without spilling blood," the official news agency APS said.

The military-backed government has been at war with Muslim guerrillas since early last year, when the authorities cancelled elections the Islamic movement would have won.

BRIEFLY

Russia faces economic ruin: Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Shumeiko appealed Thursday for urgent social welfare measures and warned that Russia faces economic ruin and social unrest unless the government curbs inflation, AP reports from Moscow.

The government also must get a grip on the money supply and stop bailing out unproductive state enterprises and decide which firms get funds on the basis of performance, Shumeiko said.

Shumeiko reviewed the economic situation during a nearly six-hour Cabinet meeting and called for an extensive package of social welfare measures—even if it means increasing the budget deficit.

The government is reviewing the plan that includes nearly 100 measures to rescue the economy and protect the growing number of poor, but Shumeiko said it would not be ready until next week and refused to discuss it.

Velayati goes to Cuba Feb 20: Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati will visit Cuba on February 20, the Cuban domestic news agency AIN said on Thursday, Reuter reports from Havana.

It gave no detailed programme for the 24-hour visit but diplomats in Havana said bilateral trade, especially deals involving sugar and oil, could be on the agenda of Velayati's talks with Cuban government officials.

Communist-ruled Cuba imported oil from Iran in 1992 and is due to complete a 1992 contract to deliver 200,000 tonnes of sugar to the Gulf state. The Caribbean island has also agreed to provide equipment, technology and training to help Iran develop its sugar industry.

The two countries signed a two-year nuclear energy cooperation programme in late 1991 but details of this agreement have not been released.

ANC, Inkatha to stop violence: The African National Congress and the rival Inkatha Freedom Party agreed on Thursday their leaders should meet urgently to try to end the township violence threatening South Africa's transition to democracy, Reuter reports from Durban.

Senior members of both groups, ending a fourth round of talks in Durban, said in a joint statement they would recommend to their leaders—Nelson Mandela and chief Mangosuthu Buthe—that they meet within a month.

The statement expressed "serious concern" at incidents of arms smuggling by both sides which it said emphasised the need to "find a comprehensive solution to the conflict between our members".

In Cape Town, a high-level ANC delegation held a second day of talks with government ministers which an ANC source said included heated discussion of arms control in black townships.

Call to isolate Mobutu: The European Parliament on Thursday urged the 12 European Community states to take measures to isolate Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko, AP reports from Strasbourg.

The EC assembly adopted a motion calling for an end to all aid to "the current regime" in Zaire where Mobutu is locked in a power struggle with the country's transitional government of Prime Minister Etienne Tshisekedi.

The parliament said Mobutu bears heavy responsibility for recent rioting among members of his armed forces that left hundreds of people dead.

It said Mobutu and "has done all he can" to stifle democratic reforms.

Students demand Aristide's return: Police broke up a protest of desk-pounding students Thursday demanding the return of Haiti's ousted president. Two small political groups also demanded the army-backed prime minister resign, AP reports from Haiti.

Two human rights groups, meanwhile, issued a report accusing Haiti's army of systematically destroying grass-roots groups—from women's alliances to trade union organisations—since ousting Jean-Bertrand Aristide in September 1991.

The rights groups said the repression was stirring up a "thirst for revenge" against the army and elite.

In the capital of Port-au-Prince, about 300 people took part in the demonstration at the State University of Haiti's medical school, the National Students Association said.

Shimon meets Ghali: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres had separate meetings on Thursday with Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and the Security Council's Moroccan President and said both were interested in facilitating a resumption of Middle East Peace Talks, Reuter reports from United Nations.

"We are very much interested to open a new page in our relations with the United Nations, with the Security Council," he told reporters later.

Myanmar frees 50 more political prisoners: BANGKOK, Feb 12: Myanmar military authorities freed 50 more political prisoners from a prison in central Myanmar, state-run Radio Yangon reported Thursday, says AFP.

The political prisoners, who were detained in Myingyan jail in Mandalay division, were freed under an amnesty passed last April by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the ruling military government, the radio said in a dispatch monitored here.

More than 2,000 political detainees have been released since the junta announced it would begin releasing political detainees deemed no longer a threat to the state, the radio said.

NEW DELHI, Feb 12: They have always been there in working class areas of every Indian city and town—garishly-painted women framed in doorways and windows, calling out to males passing by, reports IPS.

But in orthodox India, prostitution is discussed neither in private nor in public.

That is changing in the face of a looming AIDS spectre. In December, the country's top health body, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) acknowledged that 150,000 of India's estimated one million sex workers may be HIV-infected.

In a report, the ICMR has for the first time given an assessment of the HIV epidemic in India, pegging the number of carriers at 637,000 in the country's urban areas.

The report does not make