

Morocco negotiating to buy warplanes from France

PARIS, Feb 13: Morocco is negotiating to buy 15 to 20 Mirage 2000 warplanes from France in a deal that would give a major boost to its air force and cement political rapprochement, French government and industry sources said yesterday, reports Reuter.

Arab diplomatic sources said the United Arab Emirates had agreed to help fund the purchase in recognition of Morocco's Gulf War role and that Morocco is seeking aid from Saudi Arabia. But all the financing of the deal is still being worked out.

The deal would reflect a wider political thaw between Paris and Rabat after years of estrangement due to criticism in France of King Hassan's record on human rights and democracy.

It would expand the size of Morocco's air force by a third. A Moroccan group is negotiating with government blessing, to buy a stake from the French state firm Sofradin in financially troubled radio Monte Carlo, whose Arabic news broadcasts have a big audience in North Africa and the Middle East.

Symbolising the warming relationship, Morocco's crown Prince Sidi Mohamed visited France and met President Francois Mitterrand and Defence Minister Pierre Joxe last week.

Japan wants US to retain military presence in Asia

WASHINGTON, Feb 13: Japanese Foreign Minister Michio Watanabe said Friday his country wanted the United States to retain a strong military presence in Asia to help deter potential aggression and maintain stability, reports AFP.

In meetings in Washington dominated by friction over US-Japanese trade issues, Watanabe endorsed continued cooperation with the United States on security matters, saying instability remained in the region despite the end of the cold war, said Sadaaki Numata, a spokesman for the Japanese Minister.

Watanabe, who met with Defence Secretary Les Aspin and Secretary of State Warren Christopher Friday, was told Washington would continue to back the Japanese claim to the Kuril Islands, occupied by Russia since the closing days of World War II, the spokesman said.

Both Watanabe and Christopher sought to allay fears of protectionism and trade retaliation in the face of a ballooning Japanese trade surplus with the United States.

"The United States is committed to an open trading system," Christopher said during a photo session prior to the meeting, adding that Japan remains the most important US trading partner.

Watanabe said, "given the close interdependence between our two countries, it is natural that from time to time there will arise some sort of tension".

The Foreign Minister "expressed the determination on the part of the Japanese government to work hard to stimulate our economy and thereby expand domestic demand" for US products, Numata said.

But the top diplomats agreed "that economic issues should not overshadow the good and cooperative relationship between the United States and Japan," Numata said.

Japan views the US military presence as important "in light of the existence of nuclear weapons and the increasing risk of nuclear weapons proliferation," said Numata, adding that tensions over the Spratly Islands and other disputes threatened stability in the region.

Christopher noted that many other Asian countries support a continued strong US presence and pledged that Washington would "consult closely with Japan on security issues," according to Numata.

The Japanese official called for closer cooperation on economic and other issues with Washington, suggesting this involve more low-level officials than in the past who would consult on a regular basis.

Off the Record

Cafeteria makes holes in spoons to prevent stealing

MOSCOW: Innovative cafeteria workers in the Russian region of Chuvash have started making holes in spoons to keep their clients from stealing the utensils, a news agency reported Friday, says AP.

The Itar-Tass news agency said that knives and forks had disappeared a long time ago from canteens in villages in Chuvash, a region along the Volga River.

To keep the spoons from disappearing as well, workers decided to make holes in them, even though that makes it hard for customers to eat their soup, the agency said, quoting the Sovetskaya Chuvashia newspaper.

Hungry clients are now closing the holes in the spoons with pieces of bread to keep the soup from oozing out, but people are still stealing the spoons despite the holes, Itar-Tass reported.

'Don't kill your baby, abandon her'

SALEM, India: Don't kill your baby, abandon her, reports AP.

That is the message officials deliver to parents in this district of southern India.

In a male-dominated society, where millions of poor families live on the edge of survival, female infants are seen as a financial burden and often are killed.

The practice is common throughout India, but even government agencies were taken aback by a survey in this region of Tamil Nadu state last year that found female infanticide touches one family in two.

In addition to cracking down on parents who kill infants, district officials have installed white-painted cradles outside 116 hospitals and clinics so parents who do not want their babies can leave them.

Khmer Rouge warns Country will return to civil war if polls held

PHNOM PENH, Feb 13: The Khmer Rouge warned today they will hold the United Nations responsible for the consequences if elections are held in an unfair environment in Cambodia, hinting the country will return to civil war, reports AP.

"The consequences are that the election will produce a constituent assembly that will not be accepted by the Cambodian people. So the Cambodian people, as patriots, will commit themselves to do everything they could to preserve Cambodia as a nation," Khmer Rouge official Mak Ben said at a press conference.

EC hails US move to end war in Yugoslavia

BRUSSELS, Belgium, Feb 13: The European Community has welcomed the new US initiative to help promote a political settlement to fighting in the former Yugoslavia, reports AP.

In a statement issued late Friday, the EC said the initiative announced Wednesday by US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, "will contribute to the achievement of the common goal" of restoring peace.

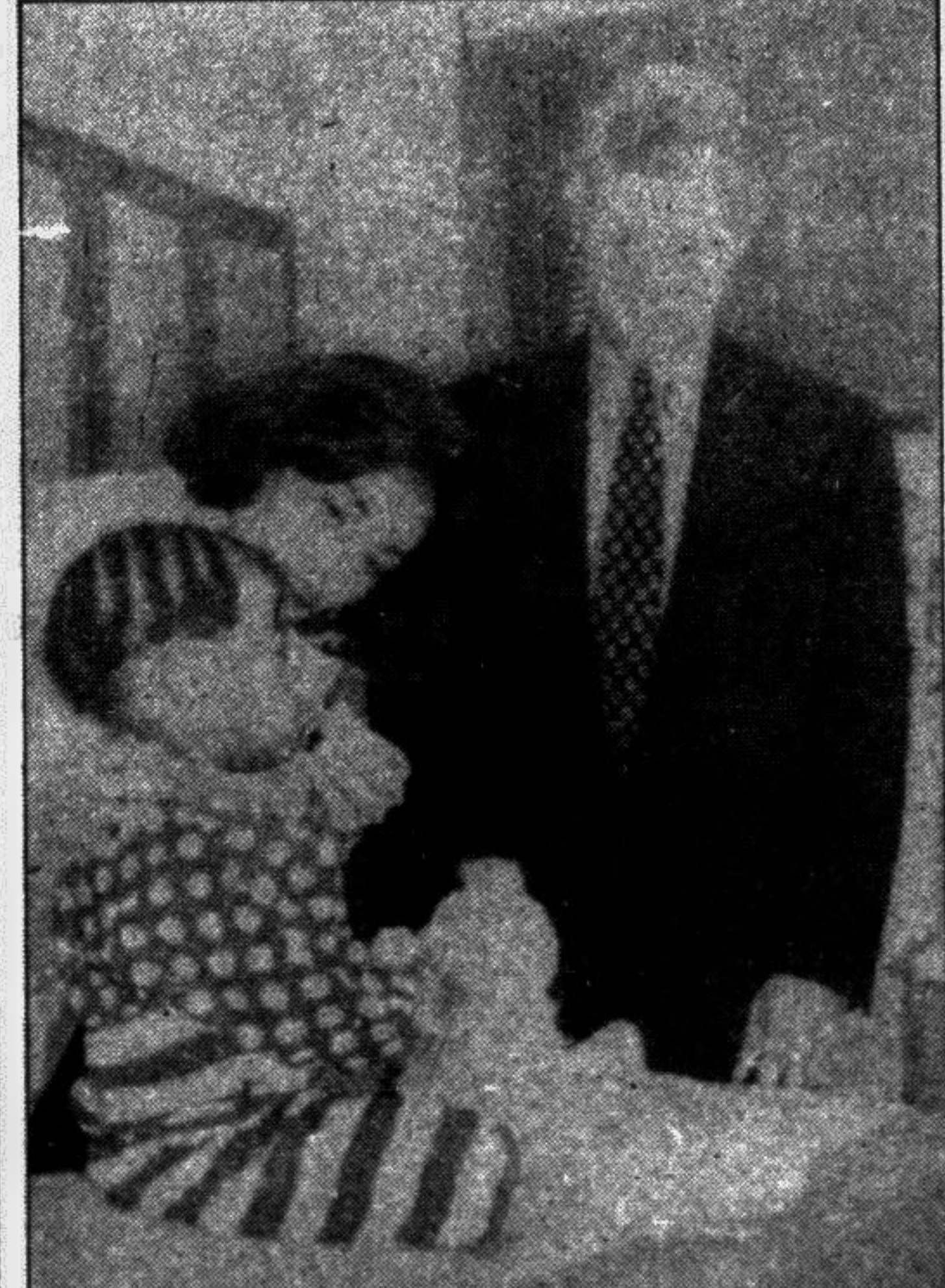
"With its emphasis on a negotiated settlement to the conflict, it is in line with the policy pursued by the European Community and its member states since the conflict began," the statement said.

"The struggle for the survival of a nation is a legitimate endeavour," he said, referring to the faction's guerilla war waged over the last 14 years to topple the Vietnamese-installed Phnom Penh government.

The UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), set up to organize elections in May to form a new government with an internationally recognized legitimacy, is trying to establish a neutral political environment in which elections can be held.

The Khmer Rouge, who refer to their struggle as expressing the will of the Cambodian people, say the elections will result in the rubber-stamping of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

"However, Hanoi says all of its troops that invaded in 1978 withdrew 10 years later."



ARLINGTON, Virginia: US President Bill Clinton (R) watches as nurse Dorothy Seelers (C) administers his oral polio vaccine Friday to 20-month-old Danielle Bailey while on a tour of a local clinic. Clinton announced a three hundred million US dollar initiative to vaccinate American children. — AFP/UNB Photo

Powell against hasty change in military

WASHINGTON, Feb 13: The United States' top soldier is advising against moving too rapidly to change the missions assigned to the military, warning that the nation's fighting power is at stake, reports AP.

"If we proceed too quickly, or impose changes so large they cannot be absorbed, the risk is that we may destroy the basic fabric of our fighting force," Ben. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at a news conference Friday.

Powell put his words of caution in a 120-page position paper on the future of the military. Such a report is required by law every three years.

The blueprint set a sharply different tone from that of the Clinton administration, which is urging swift action to cut costs. But the four-star general sought to minimize the differences, telling the news conference "there's a new team on board and we're going to get new ideas from that new team."

Earlier this week, Powell appeared on TV news programmes to deny that he wanted to leave his post earlier than his September retirement because of differences with President Clinton over gays in the military and the pace of defence cuts.

A briefing booklet given to reporters at the news conference said pointedly that Powell's report was not an attempt to short-circuit new administration policy and was not "the opening shot of an insurrection."

The report recommends ending some cross-service redundancies in maintenance and training, but advises against major consolidation of military roles carried out by the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps.

Powell also warned against reducing the size of the US overseas force too rapidly. The administration wants to bring the level of US troops in Europe to 100,000 by the end of 1996, down from previous goals of 150,000.

"Further reductions in forward stationed forces can be made, but... the current rate of reduction should be maintained," Powell wrote. "Going any faster would adversely affect the cohesion and readiness of the overall force structure."

Among his other recommendations a unified command over forces defending the continental United States a single initial training programme for fixed-wing planes and consolidation of the Navy and Air Forces command and control aircraft into the Navy's E-6A programme.

Animals butchered over political dispute

KANNUR, India: More than 100 rare snakes and dozens of other animals were killed and burned by assailants in a zoo in southern India, apparently over a political dispute, a news agency reported Friday, says AP.

A king cobra and a python were killed as a mob of 100 men poured kerosene and set fire to 30 cages Wednesday in a zoo near Kannur in Kerala state, United News of India reported.

Several porcupines, seven turtles, 30 white rats, 30 rabbits, two peacocks, six migratory birds, two vultures and an eagle also died in the blaze, it said.

One foot of a monkey was cut off and the park's pride, a king cobra, was beaten to death and burned, UNI said. Only crocodiles and monkeys survived.

The mob injured three park employees and later destroyed a garden and damaged a nearby hospital specialized in herbal medicine.

School spying on students thru' video cameras

TOKYO: A Japanese high school has been spying on its students through more than 100 video cameras over the past six years, a school official admitted yesterday, reports AP.

The 1,800 students at Numazu Kita Private High School in Shizuoka prefecture, west of Tokyo, are constantly videotaped and monitored by the cameras — located in such places as corridors, stairways, canteen and gym.

"We put the cameras to protect bullied students and to prevent the school buildings from being damaged. We increased them one after another at spots where unwanted incidents occurred, the official said.

BRIEFLY

Bagratian new Armenian PM:

Grant Bagratian, a former Armenian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Economy, was named Prime Minister Friday in a decree signed by President Levon Ter-Petrosian, Itar-Tass reported, says AFP from Moscow.

Bagratian, 35, had served as interim head of Government since February 2.

He replaced Khosrov Arutunian, who had served as premier since July 30, 1992.

Separately, Ruben Shugarian, Ter-Petrosian's former press secretary, was named Armenian Ambassador to the United States.

Fire kills 3 children in France:

Three children, aged one month to five years, died Friday in a fire that ravaged their small apartment while they were briefly unguarded, fire officials said, reports AP from France.

The fire gutted the ground-floor apartment of the four-story building in this poor northern Paris suburb. The two infants, one month and 18 months, were burned alive their cribs, rescue workers said.

The five-year-old child was asphyxiated in the bathroom. Rescue workers said they tried to resuscitate him but failed.

The victims, Pakistani-born father and Algerian-born mother, both in a state of shock, were taken to a police station but no charges were filed. The parents were at work when the tragedy occurred.

Algeria executes 4 fundamentalists:

Four Islamic militants sentenced to death by a military court last May for their involvement in an attack on a border post in eastern Algeria have been executed, the Justice Ministry announced Friday, reports AFP from Algiers.

The ministry did not say when or where the four were executed. The four were Aissa Messaoudi, also known as Tayeb Al-Aghani and held to be one of the ringleaders, Bachir Rezzig, Djamel Boudjelkha and Khaled Kezzouz.

They were among 13 Islamic radicals sentenced to death by the military court at Ouargla, on the northern edge of the Sahara, on May 4.

Eight others had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. Another was sentenced in absentia.

Eruptions continue at Mayon:

Thousands more refugees crowded evacuation centres Saturday as the Mayon volcano belched clouds of ash and debris, apparently gearing up for still bigger eruptions, reports AP from Philippines.

No casualties have been reported since the volcano resumed its eruptions Friday after a 10-day lull.

A minor explosion February 2 killed 68 people, that prompted authorities to order evacuations in a radius of six kilometres (four miles) from the crater.

"We have not lowered the alert level, therefore, we are expecting more eruptions, maybe bigger," said Raymundo Punongbayan, director of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology.

Mount Mayon, 350 kilometres (220 miles) southeast of Manila, emitted ash clouds twice Saturday — at 4:45 am (2045 GMT Friday) and 6 am (2200 GMT Friday). That brought the number of eruptions since Friday to seven.

Two US college students shot dead:

Two men were shot and killed and two others wounded Friday night at one of the United States' most distinguished black private colleges, police said, reports AP from Florida.

Police believe the four victims were students at Bethune-Cookman College. They were all shot in the same vicinity and did not know each other, police said.

The tightly knit campus of about 2,300 students has been plagued with violence the past year.

Police said in a recorded statement that they haven't established a motive for the shootings, but the Daytona Beach News Journal quoted police as saying the shootings may have stemmed from a traffic dispute.

UN okays Israel's offer to take back 101 deportees

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 13: The Security Council on Friday ended its clash with Israel over the exile of more than 400 Palestinians by accepting Israel's offer to repatriate 101 men as a first step toward bringing them all home, reports AP.

The PLO's permanent representative to the world body called the council's deal with Israel "meaningless."

Still, the compromise would enable Palestinian negotiators to return to Middle East peace talks without losing face. Arab nations had said they would not return to the bargaining table until all the men were repatriated.

US Secretary of State Warren Christopher leaves next Wednesday on a visit to Arab countries and Israel to try to reopen peace negotiations.

Security Council President Ahmed Snoussi of Morocco said he hoped the talks resume soon. "This is my deepest hope, and I have been guided by that."

The council urged Israel "to follow through expeditiously to allow the return of all deportees."

The men, deported in December for alleged links to Muslim extremists, are camped out in Lebanese territory. Lebanon has refused to accept them, saying it won't be a dumping ground for Israeli deportations.

There was no immediate word on the deportees' reaction to the UN move.

But Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi dismissed the agreement.

"We see this whole thing as just a deal in a deal. It has no legitimacy and no substance," she said.

The understanding was reached in a private meeting between Snoussi and Israeli Ambassador Gad Yaacobi after Snoussi consulted all council members. There was no resolution or statement, though the deal was announced publicly.

The PLO's representative, M Nasser al-Kidwa, commented that the deal was "completely meaningless. We do not agree with the assumption that was agreed to today."

He said he would continue Palestine Liberation Organization efforts to have trade sanctions imposed on Israel unless all the deportees are returned immediately. The PLO had asked the Security Council to impose the sanctions.

Snoussi, the council's only Arab member, said the 15-nation council would take no more public action unless the situation flared up again in Israel or Lebanon.

The deal stems from Israel's offer earlier this month to take back 101 deportees and reduce the two-year banishment of the remaining men so that all of them would be home by the end of this year.



KUWAIT: A camel and a boy compete in a camel race, popular among the Bedouin tribes in Kuwait. The race is organized every week at Kuwait Camel race club. The organizers classify the camels into several categories according to their age, which are then ridden by young boys not more than 12-year-old. The boys shriek to scare the camels into running faster. — AFP/UNB Photo

Reno's first priority to curb violent crimes

MIAMI, Feb 13: Janet Reno said that as US attorney general her first priority would be prosecuting violent crime. She also pledged to focus on the environment and children's issues — and stay in touch with the American people, reports AP.

"Too often, I think when you go to Washington you sometimes forget the communities and neighbourhoods of America," Reno said on Friday after returning from the capital, where President Clinton nominated her Thursday for the Justice Department helm.

Reno said she believed her 15 years of experience as Miami's top prosecutor would help her develop national programmes that work on the local level, and to foster better cooperation between federal and local law enforcers. She also stressed that she wants a fiscally responsible Justice Department.

"I think I have an understanding and experience of the day-to-day life of America — the problems, the frustration, the crime, the youth gangs, the violence that threads its way through all of America," she said at an airport news conference.

"I've had the hard experiences with dealing with riots, with dealing with urban problems, and I think I can translate that into some national policies that I hope can be effective for local government."

Clinton nominated Reno, 54, after two earlier candidates withdrew because they had hired illegal aliens. The US Senate must confirm Reno.

Reno, whose family lived on the edge of the Everglades amid pet peacocks and alligators, said her trip back from Washington reinforced her desire to protect the environment.

"It was really something as the plane started to descend, to look out across that ocean and then to look west across Florida and see blue skies still existing," she said.

Myanmar rebels kill 61 villagers

YANGON, Feb 13: Ethnic minority rebels raided a village in northeastern Myanmar and killed 61 people, including 21 children, the state-owned Working People's Daily said Saturday, reports AP.

The group of about 300 rebels shot and bayoneted villagers last Tuesday in Linkhe township, in Shan State, and turned down 150 houses before fleeing, the paper said. Fifteen women were killed, along with children from two months to 12 years of age.

The report, which could not be independently verified, said the attackers were of the Shan United Revolutionary Army, one of two major Shan rebel groups.

determined later in the year that the disease was indeed Leishmaniasis and that it affected thousands of persons — both in western upper Nile and in the capital, Khartoum, where many had fled in search of security.

A special centre was rapidly set up in Khartoum and nearly 2,500 Kala Azar patients have as of this date been treated there. MSF then established two other treatment centres in July 1989 in western upper Nile, 800 km south of the capital, where, between October 1989 and February 1992, 13,000 patients have been treated, despite enormous logistical problems.

About 4 lakh Sudanese at peril of infection by Kala Azar

GENEVA, Feb 13: Between 300,000 and 400,000 persons in southern Sudan are currently at risk of infection by Leishmaniasis — also known as Kala Azar — what experts at the World Health Organization (WHO) consider to be one of the largest epidemics of the deadly disease in recorded history, reports WHO.

Recent reports by the non-government organization 'Medecins Sans Frontieres Netherlands' (MSF/Netherlands) suggest that as many as 40,000 persons may already have died, and that the population of some villages has been reduced by 30 per cent to 40 per cent.

The disease has already spread north and east from its initial focus, and if effective action is not taken, there is a risk of the disease spreading even further, with devastating consequences.

The affected area, in the western upper Nile province of southern Sudan, is a war zone, fighting between Sudanese government troops and rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) has made it impossible to undertake effective treatment and the large-scale measures required to control effectively the spread of disease. In normal times, this disease affects only a limited and stable population.

The devastation caused by war, famine and displacements of population have created the preconditions for an epidemic.

Visceral Leishmaniasis (VL) called the "killing disease" in Sudan is transmitted from man to man by a small insect called the sandfly and usually associated with fever, enlargement of the spleen, lymph nodes, and liver, as well as the anaemia and severe wasting. Treatment is based on daily injections of pentavalent antimonials. (20 mg/sb+kg/day for 30 days) at a total cost of around US dollar 100 per patient. If untreated, all patients with clinical symptoms will die.

In endemic areas like southern Sudan, clinical cases represent only "the tip of the iceberg". Many more people are usually infected, developing severe forms of the disease if, for example, they are malnourished.

It is suspected that during the Gulf War in 1991, a number of soldiers were infected, though few of them showed any immediate clinical manifestations. The United States Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR) and the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland are now looking at the magnitude of this infection among American soldiers. Those who were present in the Gulf have meanwhile been barred from donating blood due to the potential risk of transmission. Blood in the United States is not at present routinely screened for Leishmaniasis.

Another area badly affected by Visceral Leishmaniasis in the Indian subcontinent, where approximately 400,000 new cases are estimated to occur each year. Mortality is reported to be between 5 per cent and 7 per cent.

In southern Sudan, the first signs of the epidemic became apparent in mid-1988 — although it was first believed to be an epidemic of typhoid fever. MSF/Netherlands, which had reported these first cases,