

BRIEFLY

Israeli troops kill 2 in Lebanon :

Israeli soldiers killed two guerrillas in a clash on Monday in the Jewish state's "Security Zone" in South Lebanon, the army said, reports Reuter from Jerusalem.

An Israeli army force on an operation near the north central sector of the Security Zone encountered a terrorist squad, opened fire on them, and two terrorists were killed, an army spokesman said.

He said the clash took place near Bint Jbeil. No Israeli casualties have been reported, he said.

The squad was apparently headed to carry out an attack on Israeli or South Lebanese army troops operating in the Security Zone," he said, referring to Israel's client militia.

Six Timor rebels surrender :

Six rebels from a group seeking independence for the Indonesian region of East Timor have surrendered, a military official said Tuesday, reports AP from Indonesia.

Indonesian authorities claim the defections are a sign that the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, or FRETILIN is weakening after the capture of the group's leader last year.

Maj M Simbolon, a military spokesman, said the rebels gave up Monday in the village of Malisaga about 95 kilometres (60 miles) from here.

He said the six — Mario Soares, 35, Manuel da Silva, 48, Agustinus Fiadade, 35, Mario Baros, 35, Alcino Soares, 25, and Marcus de Araujo, 29 — surrendered with weapons including a gun, a hand grenade and bows and arrows.

According to Simbolon, the six said they decided to give up after receiving a message from captured FRETILIN leader Jose Alexander Gusmao that those who surrender would be treated well and returned to their families.

Russian N-reactor closed :

A short circuit in the control panel at the Kursk Nuclear Power Plant on Monday shut down one of the reactors at the Chernobyl-type station in southern Russia, state-run media reported, reports AP from Moscow.

The incident measured "zero" on the seven-point international scale of nuclear events, according to the Itar-Tass news agency. There were no injuries or reports of radioactivity leaks at the station, it said.

The incident occurred at 3:49 am (0049 GMT) Monday as workers were replacing a gauge in Unit No 2 of the power plant, located 500 kilometres (310 miles) south of Moscow, Russian television said.

The Kursk plant has four, graphite reactors, known by the Russian acronym as RBMKs. The RBMK reactor that exploded at Chernobyl in 1986 contaminated thousands of people and sent a radioactive cloud around the globe.

Television and Itar-Tass said an investigation has been launched into what exactly caused the short circuit at the Kursk plant.

Crackdown on FIS :

Algerian police said on Monday they had smashed a huge network that supplied arms to Islamic extremists, detaining 100 people and seizing more than 800 pistols, shotguns and submachine-guns, reports Reuter from Algiers.

A gendarmerie statement quoted by the official news agency APS said the network collected and made weapons for the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS).

Half of those arrested were said to be FIS supporters. The statement said this was the biggest arms network dismantled in the country in 30 years and covered 11 regions, including the capital.

Car bombs kill four :

Two car bombs shattered a busy downtown district Monday, killing four people and injuring more than 120 as glass rained from skyscrapers and survivors groped through thick smoke, reports AP from Bogota.

Twenty cars were destroyed and dozens of stores were severely damaged. Windows were broken in an area about a half-mile (800 metres) square, AP photographer Ricardo Mazzalan said at the scene.

Lankan Tigers hold 4,000 in Nazi-like prison camps

COLOMBO, Feb 16: Tamil Tiger rebels are holding about 4,000 people in Nazi-like prison camps in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, according to a new human rights report, says AP.

Some of the prisoners are being tortured and beaten to death by wardens who are selected on "distinction of cruelty and blind obedience" to the rebel leadership, the report says.

The prisons include small underground bunkers and large jungle camps run by the most sadistic guards, the University of Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) said in its 10th report.

The whole pattern of camps and the meticulous administration of the system give the appearance of being consciously drawn from films and books about the Nazi and Stalinist prison complexes," said the 78-page study, obtained by The Associated Press Tuesday.

Other human rights groups such as Amnesty International have issued reports describing abuses by police, rebels, and soldiers fighting the guerrillas. But the teachers are the only members of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority who study human

rights abuses that Tamil rebels commit against other Tamils.

The militants, who are based in the northern city of Jaffna, have been fighting for independence from the nation's majority Sinhalese population for 10 years.

The teachers' 10th report raises the number of prisoners in the camps from about 3,000 to about 4,000 and it contains more details about how the prisons operate. It also is the first study of theirs that compares the camps to Nazi and Stalinist ones.

To avoid being attacked by rebels, the teachers withhold their identities from the reports and have inform, a human rights group based in Colombo, distribute it to reporters in the capital.

Referring to the prison camps as the "Jaffna Guleg," the report says villagers pretend they don't know about them.

That people in Jaffna do not talk about prisoners seems an adequate reason for ignoring the existence of this phenomenon," the study says. "Will this too be exposed when it is too late for the victims, like the horrors of Nazi concentration camps?"

The Tigers have admitted holding 38 Sinhalese policemen and a soldier, but have made no mention of Tamil prisoners.

More than 17,500 people have been killed since the rebels began their separatist war in 1983.

Kuwaitis vote again for 2 parliament seats

KUWAIT CITY, Feb 16: Thousands of Kuwaitis voted Monday to fill two parliament seats left open because of allegations of election fraud, reports AP.

Two opposition members were running against the pro-government candidates who beat them in October. The losers claimed they lost the first election because soldiers voted illegally, Kuwaiti law bans soldiers, as well as women and naturalized citizens, from casting ballots.

The outcome of the re-match will not change the balance in Parliament — opposition politicians captured 35 of the 50 seats in the October 5 elections. But Monday's voting was a milestone for the emirate.

BELET HUEN, Somalia, Feb 16: Clashes and raids between rival Somali factions north of the region controlled by US-led military forces threaten a cease-fire in the south, according to Canadian soldiers at this outpost, reports AP.

In the past week, at least two children were killed and five other people wounded in fighting near the Ethiopian border between factions that still receive arms shipments from northern ports, officers and troops said Monday.

US-allied commanders in Mogadishu, the capital, were discussing how to respond, but were reluctant to take action unless the violence affected

Palestinians inform US Talks with Israel not possible until deportee crisis solved

CAIRO, Feb 16: The Palestinians have informed the United States they will not resume peace talks with Israel before a settlement of the deportee crisis, a senior PLO official said Monday, reports AP.

Nabil Shaath, adviser to Palestine Liberation Organization chief Yasser Arafat, said this week's Middle East tour by US Secretary of State Warren Christopher was a "last hope" to resolve the crisis.

The spokeswoman of the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks, Hanan Ashrawi, informed State Department officials in Washington that the UN Security Council statement has not changed the Palestinian position, he said.

The Security Council on Friday voiced support for a US inspired compromise offer for Israel to take back some 100 of 396 deportees it expelled from the occupied territories to Lebanon in December.

It also urged Israel to repatriate the rest "as soon as possible," retreating from Security Council resolution 799 ordering the immediate return of all the men.

Shaath told AFP the PLO still wanted a precise timetable for their return.

"The statement was only an approval of the settlement proposed by (Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak) Rabin. That is why without a solution we can not fix a date to resume negotiations," he said.

"We are waiting for M Christopher's tour of the Middle East as a last hope, because it is up to the United States as the main sponsor of the peace process to work for a resumption of the negotiations."

The Secretary of State embarks on the tour on February 17.

Asked whether the Palestinians would boycott negotiations even if other Arab countries returned to the talks with Israel, Shaath said: "That's a question we will examine later with our Arab partners."

Lebanese Foreign Minister Fares Bweiz, who recently met Syrian President Hafez Assad, said last week that the question of whether to resume the talks should not be linked to the deportees.

In Damascus, PLO envoy Marwan Abdel Hamid delivered a written message from Arafat to the Syrian leader on Monday, Palestinian sources said. They gave no details.

Clashes mar polls in Nagaland, Meghalaya

GUWAHATI, Feb 16: Minor violence and attempts to seize polling booths on Monday marred assembly elections in India's northeastern states, officials and police said, reports Reuter.

They said voting for the 60-member assemblies in Nagaland and Meghalaya was brisk and large queues formed outside polling booths throughout the day, election officials said.

Police said nearly 1.86 million people in both states voted in the elections which were largely peaceful, apart from a few incidents of violence in which eight people were injured.

In the Tuli Constituency of Nagaland, members of one of the parties, the Nagaland People's Council, fired guns to scare away voters in an attempt to seize polling booths, police said.

Two people were injured in the shooting, police said. They added that six others were injured in clashes in the two states.

The contest was mainly between the Congress Party heading the federal government in New Delhi and regional parties in the two states.

Nagaland, the state plagued by separatist insurgency, was put under New Delhi's direct rule in April last year.

In Meghalaya, the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party was contesting 20 seats.



JERUSALEM : Mother (R) and sister of Israeli Yehsekel Mizrahi, who was knifed to death by a Palestinian, grieve during his funeral Monday. The Palestinian injured two other Israelis during the stabbing, including a pregnant woman. — AFP/UNB photo

Thai military bans airing Dalai Lama's interview on TV

BANKOK, Feb 16: The Dalai Lama was scheduled to arrive here today from India to join an unprecedented Nobel Laureates' crusade to release Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi, as the powerful Thai military moved to curtail the fallout of the visit on relations with Myanmar and China, reports AFP.

The military scrapped an interview to have been aired on its Channel Five TV station early Wednesday, that would have been the widest exposure given to the Thai public of the Tibetan spiritual leader's brief 27-hour visit.

Executives at Channel Five said permission to air the programme had been withdrawn Monday, and sources close to the organisers confirmed the ban had been under military pressure.

As well as banning the broadcast the military forced an abrupt channel change in plans for the Tibetan spiritual leader to stay as the guest of Thailand's supreme Buddhist patriarch at a prestigious Buddhist temple near the royal palace, informed sources said.

Alternative plans were under way, the sources said today.

Dissatisfaction among the military with the crusade, and in particular the Dalai Lama's part in it, has been mounting

in the past two days with warnings that it may harm Bangkok's relations with China and Myanmar.

China tried twice unsuccessfully to stop the Thai government issuing a visa to the Dalai Lama, regarded by many of his followers in Tibet as god-king and the symbol of Tibet's struggle for independence.

Observers noted that the visit coincided with reports of a crackdown in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa on officials who did not sufficiently distance themselves from the Dalai Lama.

Serb forces shell Sarajevo

SARAJEVO, Feb 16: Rebel Serbs rained artillery shells on the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo and blocked a UN convoy trying to get food and medicine to starving Muslims in the east of the Balkan republic, reports Reuter.

Serb gunners in hilltop strongholds hammered the capital, shells sometimes exploding at a rate of one a minute on Monday.

The shelling was joined by tank and infantry attacks on Bosnian defenders in the strategic western suburbs of Stup and Azici.

Shrapnel and masonry showered into the abandoned streets of Stup, just six km (four miles) from Sarajevo's centre. Bosnia's Muslim-led troops dived for cover from the fierce bombardment.

"It's been like this for five days," said Ibro, a Bosnian soldier sheltering in a doorway down a narrow alley. "We're expecting another infantry assault when the shelling stops."

Stup and Azici are the last Bosnian-held suburbs west of the main highway linking Sarajevo with the airport, where the UN ferries in supplies for 380,000 civilians trapped in a 10-month Serb siege.

If the two towns all, the Serbs would have control of the vital road to the airport and be perched even more firmly on the doorstep of the capital.

The Muslim-led forces of the Bosnian government kept up artillery fire throughout the day on the Serb suburb of Ilidza, also close to the airport, Bosnian Serb radio in Pale, outside Sarajevo, said.

Five people, including three civilians, were killed and several people were wounded, it said.

Serb rebels in eastern Bosnia have forced the 10-truck UN convoy to wait in freezing weather.

Canadian regiment, said that unless Somali leaders make progress in peace talks scheduled for March 15 in Ethiopia, "anything can happen."

The rival factions near Belet Huen include a faction of the United Somali Congress affiliated with warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid, the Somali National Front that supports ousted dictator Mohammed Siad Barre and the independent Somali Salvation Democratic Front, Power said.

Each has about 5,000 fighters in the area, which stretches from the northeast corner of the Canadian zone, 250 miles (400 kilometers)

northeast of Mogadishu, to Galkaio about 150 miles (240 kilometers) farther north. The factions are in a 50-mile (80-kilometer) wide strip along the Ethiopian border, Power said.

Fighting in the southern port of Kismayu between pro-Aidid forces and Those of Mohamed Said Hirs, a son-in-law of Siad Barre known as Gen Morgan, Scuttled preliminary peace talks last month.

The US military said Monday that Belgian and American soldiers raided a camp in Southern Somalia and captured nine people suspected of attacking a village Sunday.

Iranian submarines concern Gulf states

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates, Feb 16: The Gulf Arab states are seeking to boost their naval power to counter Iran's newly acquired attack submarines. But military experts say it could take five years to do so, reports AP.

Anti-submarine warfare, an unknown dimension in the region until now, has become a new priority. As such, it is the focus of a major, five-day arms exhibition that began here Sunday involving 350 defence companies from 34 countries.

"There are a lot of people displaying anti-submarine warfare systems where there were none in the past, because none of the countries in the region needed that capability," said Richard Coltart of Britain's Marconi Defence Systems.

"There's now a definite concern, particularly in the southern Gulf, about the Iranian submarines," said Coltart, whose firm produces anti-sub weapons and detection equipment.

In December, the Iranian navy took delivery of the first of three Russian diesel-electric submarines, the first country in the oil-rich Gulf to acquire such weapons.

That has changed the regional balance of naval power. The Kilo-class craft could threaten oil tanker traffic in the narrow Strait of Hormuz, the entrance to the Gulf, or threaten Gulf shipping outside the shallow Gulf.

Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE — countries which have the most coastline outside the Gulf — appear the most concerned.

"The kilos are a very distinct danger," said anti-submarine warfare specialist Ian Ewart.

Off the Record

Bushes cruising without dog

HOUSTON: Former President George Bush and his wife, Barbara, are cruising the Caribbean. Their dogs stayed home in Houston, reports AP.

Spokesman Andrew Maner in Houston said it was the Bushes' first real vacation since the election.

"He was talking about this for weeks. He's very excited," said Maner.

Maner declined to release the name of the ship. The Bushes began the cruise Saturday from Fort Lauderdale, Fla, according to Maner. They planned to be in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Monday night.

The Bushes will leave the cruise ship Tuesday in St. Martin and fly to Miami, said Maner.

The Bushes will spend the rest of the week with their son, Jeb, and his family in Florida. The former president will be golfing in Florida and Georgia, said Maner.

The Bushes plan to return to Houston next Sunday.

Castration antidote to feline AIDS

HONG KONG: Animal advocates, facing an apparent outbreak of "feline AIDS" here, reassured the public yesterday that it was at no risk but urged cat owners to de-sex their pets to curb the spread of the disease, reports Reuter.

"This disease is definitely spreading among cats and we estimate that the population of cats infected in Hong Kong could be tremendous," said Rossana Lai of Hong Kong's Royal Society for the prevention of cruelty to animals.

"But feline AIDS only affects cats so people should not panic," Lai added. "There is no cause for panic."

The symptoms of feline AIDS closely resemble those associated with the deadly human version of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

A male cat was put down in Hong Kong after testing positive two weeks ago — the first recorded case in the British colony since the incurable condition was discovered in California in 1980, Lai said.

Queen accepts Sun's apology

LONDON, Feb 16: Queen Elizabeth on Monday accepted an apology by the Sun tabloid newspaper and its offer to pay 200,000 pounds (280,000 dollars) to charity for breaking an embargo on her Christmas message, reports Reuter.

"Her majesty is content to regard the matter as settled," Buckingham Palace said in a statement.

After vowing to fight a writ issued on behalf of the Queen last week for alleged breach of copyright of her Christmas day message, the Sun climbed down on Monday and said it regretted publishing the speech two days early.

Brazauskas elected Lithuanian President

VILNIUS (Lithuania), Feb 16: Former communist leader Algirdas Brazauskas was elected Lithuanian President on Sunday as voters opted overwhelmingly for an experienced hand to deal with the country's economic plight, reports Reuter.

With almost all results in, electoral commission figures gave him nearly 60 per cent of the vote, to 39 per cent for Emigré Stašys Lozoraitis, the Nationalist candidate.

"I have a big task ahead of me," Brazauskas said as the results became known. "I am not afraid of the responsibility, I know what it means to be in power."

KABUL: A Shia woman with her children recounts Sunday how her husband was killed by the Mujahideen in Afshar, a west Kabul district during recent violence and looting there. Several families lost their men due to ongoing factional fighting.

— AFP/UNB photo

2 drug traffickers to die in Singapore

SINGAPORE, Feb 16: Singapore's high court has sentenced two men to death for drug trafficking, bringing to 67 the number of drug offenders facing death by hanging, reports Reuter.

Mufitaw Salam, 26, a business administration student from Ghana, was sentenced on Monday for trafficking in more than two kg (4.4 lbs) of heroin, a Singapore Narcotics Bureau spokesman said.

He was arrested at Singapore's Changi airport on December 20, 1990 en route from Thailand to Amsterdam.

Singaporean Michael Lim, 25, was sentenced on Monday for trafficking in 400 gm (14 ounces) of heroin.

Factional violence threatens ceasefire in Somalia

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In the past week, at least two children were killed and five other people wounded in fighting near the Ethiopian border between factions that still receive arms shipments from northern ports, officers and troops said Monday.

US-allied commanders in Mogadishu, the capital, were discussing how to respond, but were reluctant to take action unless the violence affected

restoring order since the US-led coalition began arriving Dec 9.

"If something is not done to stabilize the area, it will be very difficult for a UN force to keep the peace," said Sgt Tim Power.

Power works in an intelligence unit at Belet Huen, 200 miles (320 kilometers) north of Mogadishu and 20 miles (32 kilometers) from the border.

Under a UN Security Council mandate, 18,000 US soldiers and Marines and 14,000 soldiers from 22 other countries have halted most fighting in southern areas that were devastated by two years of clan war and severe drought.

Some 350,000 people died last year and perhaps 2 million are still at risk.

A United Nations force of about 20,000 peacekeepers is expected to begin taking over from the US-led coalition by April. It would deploy throughout the country instead of just in the south.

Power, whose regiment controls an area bordering the clashes, said reconnaissance missions have shown a lot of tanks and artillery. He said they are mostly sitting idle, but there are raids back and forth.

"Col Carol Mathieu commander of the 1,300-soldier

northeast of Mogadishu, to Galkaio about 150 miles (240 kilometers) farther north. The factions are in a 50-mile (80-kilometer) wide strip along the Ethiopian border, Power said.

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