

BRIEFLY

Bosnians confront UN troops: Four civilians confronted two UN soldiers in the southern Bosnia-Herzegovina city of Mostar Thursday and stole their rifles, a Croat forces spokesman reported Friday, AFP says from Sarajevo.

The civilians then made off in a car. The spokesman said the car's licence plate had been noted. He did not report what the soldiers' superiors had to say to them.

Move to oust Mobutu: US, French and Belgian officials are discussing ways to bring democracy to riot-torn Zaire and to move President Mobutu Sese Seko out of power, a State Department spokesman said on Friday, Reuter reports from Washington.

However, spokesman Joe Snyder declined to confirm a published report citing a State Department document that described the situation in Zaire as being as potentially explosive as "Somalia and Liberia rolled into one."

The February 11 document suggested seizing Mobutu's personal property, including a plane, a yacht and houses, to "send a strong message to him," the New York Times reported on Friday.

President Bill Clinton will probably approve the three countries' decision on sanction against Zaire within the next few days, the newspaper said.

Palestinian shot dead in Gaza: Israeli soldiers shot and killed a masked Palestinian in the occupied West Bank on Friday night, military officials said, Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

They said an army unit opened fire when it encountered two masked Palestinians during an operation in the Tulkarem refugee camp. One of them was badly wounded and the other escaped.

The wounded man, who died as he was being treated by an army doctor, was carrying two loaded pistols, the officials said.

Israelis have killed at least 1,021 Palestinians since an Arab uprising against Israeli rule erupted in December, 1987. Palestinians have killed 112 Israelis in the same period.

4 killed as plane, copter collide: A small airplane and a helicopter, both being flown by student pilots, collided over an airport runway Friday, crashing in flames and killing all four people aboard, AP reports from Atlanta.

The helicopter appeared to fly into the bottom of the Cessna "at an altitude of about 100 feet (30 meters), said witness Dan Harbison. They both fell in separate balls of flame and went down about 20 feet (6 meters) apart."

The two aircraft, a Robinson R-22 Alpha helicopter and a two-seat Cessna 152, were practicing landing approaches at Fulton County Airport — Brown Field when they collided, Federal Aviation Administration spokeswoman Christy Williams said.

A student pilot and a flight instructor were on the airplane, said Ms Williams and officials at Peachtree-DeKalb Flight Academy, which owned the plane. Neither would identify the victims.

Prestige Helicopters of Chamblee, which trains pilots, identified the dead in its leased helicopter as Dr Ronald Lorber, an Atlanta orthodontist, and Richard Hull, an FAA examiner.

Japan launches X-ray satellite: Japan launched Saturday a satellite to observe far-off galaxies with X-ray telescopes, Education Ministry officials said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The Astro-D, which was launched from the southern town of Uchinoura, is equipped with four state-of-the-art X-ray telescopes that provide clear images, enabling a probe of stars that can be analyzed only through X-rays, it said.

This is the fourth X-ray satellite launched by the ministry's institute of space and astronomical science. The last satellite, Astro-C, was in operation between February 1987 and November 1991.

Thousands protest new law Egypt curbs Islamic hold on professional unions

CAIRO, Feb 20: Thousands of protesters rallied here Friday to discuss ways of fighting a new law aimed at smashing the Islamic hold on professional associations, correspondents reported, says AFP.

The Egyptian authorities stepped up security in Cairo to prevent any street demonstrations as mass meetings got underway at the headquarters of the doctors, lawyers and engineers associations which are dominated by fundamentalists.

Some 5,000 people gathered after weekly Friday prayers at the Engineers' Association led by Construction Minister Hassaballah Al-Kafrawi, shouting slogans accusing the government of "killing democracy."

"Fathi Sorur (the parliamentary President) and the government do not want progress for our country," they shouted and called for action to confront the new law.

The Secretary General of the Engineers' Association, Mohammad Bishr, told AFP that the Egyptian security forces had prevented thousands of union members from converging on the capital from other parts of the country.

"They forced several buses carrying engineers from entering Cairo," Bishr charged. He said the fight would con-

tinue against the law, which was passed Tuesday.

"The government pretends that the new law will guarantee larger democratic participation in union activity while in fact this law reduces freedoms," he said.

President Hosni Mubarak's government pushed through the law in parliament on Tuesday to prevent fundamentalists from winning control of professional associations and unions.

It sets a minimum turnout of 50 per cent in the first round of leadership elections and 33 per cent in the second round of leadership elections and 33 per cent in the second round, with the aim of limiting the chances of fundamentalists winning control by benefitting from low turnouts.

If turnout falls short of the new limits, the new law calls for the appointment of magistrates to manage the unions for an interim six-month period, at the end of which a new vote must be held.

The leftists and liberal opposition agree that the new law undermines democracy and freedom and have charged that parliament, which is dominated by MPs from Mubarak's National Democratic Party, did not consult them.

Washington ready to be full partner of ME peace process

AMMAN, Feb 20: US Secretary of State Warren Christopher said Friday that Washington was prepared to be a full partner in the Middle East peace process despite suspended talks over Palestinian deportees, reports AFP.

"President Bill Clinton has sent me to this region as a sign of his commitment to the cause of Middle East peace," he said on his arrival here from Cairo on the second leg of a tour aimed at jump-starting the stalled Middle East peace talks.

"He (Clinton) said, and I want to reiterate this in Amman, that the US is prepared to be a full partner in pursuit of that cause provided other parties share our de-

termination to resume peace negotiations," he stressed.

Christopher is to discuss Saturday with King Hussein and senior Jordanian officials means of re-starting the negotiations which were suspended when Israel deported more than 400 Palestinians from the occupied territories to a frozen no man's land in South Lebanon on December 17.

"We will do our part if they do theirs," added Christopher at the Amman military airport.

The Secretary of State said he was "interested in hearing King Hussein's view on what Jordan and the US can do together to re-energize the peace negotiations."

Sources close to the Secretary have warned that the Middle East peace process, inspired by the administration of former President George Bush, would "not continue to have high priority if we're pushing against a closed door."

Christopher praised the democratization process launched by Jordan in 1989 as "a commitment that we very much applaud," adding that he would also discuss "a wide range of other issues" with Jordanian officials.

Jordanian Foreign Minister Kamel Abu Jaber reiterated his country's "firm commitment to the peace process with the aim of achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace to the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts."

Such peace, Abu Jaber said, should be achieved "on the basis of United Nations Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 and the concept of exchanging land-for-peace."

"Since the Madrid conference, tension in the region has not subsided with the level of Israeli violence in the occupied territories increasing and the current deportees' problem being one symptom," said Abu Jaber referring to the Middle East peace parley



US Secretary of State Warren Christopher answering to the questions on his arrival at Cairo airport Thursday. — Star TV photo

Maharashtra CM demands sacking of Sharad Pawar

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: The Chief Minister of an Indian state demanded Saturday the sacking of Defence Minister Sharad Pawar, accusing him of harming the interests of the ruling Congress (I) Party, reports AP.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Sudhakar Rao Naik said Pawar, who tried to become Prime Minister in June 1991, was indulging in "anti-party activities" and should be sacked, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

Naik said the demands by Pawar supporters in Maharashtra state for his resignation following the bloody Hindu-Muslim violence in January in Bombay was "unconstitutional."

Bombay, India's commercial hub, is the capital of the western state of Maharashtra, which is governed by the Congress (I). Both Naik and Pawar had from Maharashtra.

Naik was originally a Pawar protegee, but he has increasingly distanced himself from the Defence Minister. The Chief Minister now is a vocal supporter of Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao.

Naik said Pawar's dismissal from the cabinet "would not in any way weaken the Congress Party. On the contrary it would only strengthen the hands of the Prime Minister. PTI quoted him as saying in Aurangabad city.

minister sacked six of his ministers on February 13 on charges of indiscipline.

All six were supporters of Pawar, who denounced the dismissals as an "act of desperation" by Naik.

Shi'ites burn Rushdie's effigy in Beirut

BEIRUT, Feb 20: Hundreds of Shiite Muslim zealots burned an effigy of Salman Rushdie in South Beirut on Friday to declare support for Iran's renewal of a death sentence on the British writer, reports AP.

They set fire to an effigy of the author and shouted "Death to Britain, Death to Rushdie" as they paraded through Beirut's Btr el-Abed Shiite suburb.

The effigy was made up of a painted head of Rushdie on top of a jacket wrapped around a pole, with a sign next to the neck saying in Arabic, "Death to the heretic Rushdie."

Men, women and children took part in the demonstration, which was organized by Hezbollah, or Party of God, the standard-bearer of Iran's fiery brand of Shiite fundamentalism in Lebanon.

The protest was led by Hezbollah clerics. Marchers brandished placards reading "Rushdie is a germ of corruption that should be stamped out".

Crackdown on illegal Thai arms traders

BANGKOK, Feb 20: Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, pledging to take tough action against Mafia-style crime, has announced the setting up of a special government task force to crack down on the trade in war weapons, reports AFP.

The special committee, to be chaired by Chuan, will look into ways of suppressing the arms racket, the premier was quoted as saying in news reports today.

"The suppression campaign against trading in war weapons should be done promptly during the term of this government," the premier was quoted as saying.

Chuan was speaking as he emerged from a meeting to discuss fighting illegal weapons with top Defence and Interior Ministry officials as well as military and police chiefs.

In the wake of a recent spate of bombing incidents, the police have called for the death penalty for illegal arms possession and trading. The maximum penalty faced by illegal arms traders under Thai law is life imprisonment.

But in earlier statements Chuan rejected this, insisting instead on stepped up efforts to fight "influential people" involved in organised crime.

Earlier this week police chief Sawat Amornvittad admitted some police officers were aiding the arms racket by providing protection to traders

dealing in arms smuggled from provinces bordering on war-torn Cambodia.

In his remarks Friday, Chuan complained that police officials had so far failed to submit to him a list of policemen and military officers suspected of being involved in the trade.

He said, however, that he was confident a crackdown was "feasible as his government had no links with 'influential people' in the underworld."

Meanwhile, a Thai court has sentenced five Thai men and a woman to death for heroin trafficking, the Bangkok Post reported today.

But four of them, including a police corporal and the

woman, had their sentence commuted to life imprisonment by the Bangkok criminal court after they had pleaded guilty.

The two whose sentences were not commuted were identified as Pitak Madakul, 30 and Srirwan Chaysarn, 35, they were given the death penalty because they were in possession of fire arms at the time of their arrest, the Post said.

No executions have been carried out in Thailand for several years.

Earlier this week, two Canadians, Ralph Robert Wilson and Michael Carl McNeil, were sentenced to death and Briton Malyn William Wallace was sentenced to life imprisonment for heroin trafficking.

Afghan warring factions agree to 72-hr truce

ISLAMABAD, Feb 20: Afghanistans main warring factions have agreed to a United Nations request for a 72-hour ceasefire in Kabul to allow the evacuation of badly wounded civilians, a senior UN official said on Friday, reports Reuter.

We have received a positive response from the government and from Hezb-i-Islami to our request for a ceasefire, Sotirios Mousouris, special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for Afghanistan, said.

The ceasefire between the government of fundamentalist President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his hardline Hezb-i-Islami opponents would take effect early next week, Mousouris said.

More than 1,000 people have been killed and 5,000 wounded in a month of rocket and artillery bombardments between the two sides that eased after a temporary ceasefire last Sunday.

The UN appealed for the 72-hour ceasefire to allow the evacuation of wounded in need of special surgical treatment and shipment of surgical and

medical supplies to the capital, Mousouris said.

The UN was still awaiting a reply from the Shiite Hezb-i-Wahdat group based in Kabul's western suburbs and which lost radio contact with its office in Pakistan after government troops evicted them from their headquarters this week, he said.

Mousouris said the UN would coordinate any evacuation with the International Committee of the Red Cross.



MARJ EZ ZOUHOUR: Palestinian deportees pray in the camp in no man's land in South Lebanon Friday. —AFP/UNB photo

3 IRA members jailed for 24 yrs each

BELFAST, Feb 20: Three members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) were each sentenced on Friday to 24 years in prison on terrorist charges, reports AFP.

Michael Bennett, 27, Oliver Masterton, 32, and Peter Lynch, 21, all from Belfast, were each convicted at Belfast Crown Court earlier this week of "conspiracy to murder person or persons unknown and possessing firearms with intent to endanger life."

The three men were arrested in August 1991 while travelling in a stolen taxi.

Israel condemned for human rights violation

GENEVA, Feb 20: The UN Human Rights Commission condemned Israel on Friday for human rights violations in the occupied territories and approved the appointment of a special rapporteur on Israel responsible to the commission.

The commission passed a strongly-worded resolution asserting "the right of the Palestinian people to resist the Israeli occupation by all means," by 26 votes to 16, with five abstentions.

Those opposing the resolution included the United States, Russia, Japan and the European countries.

ROK won't issue visa to Japan's Socialist Party chief

SEOUL, Feb 20: The government will not issue a visa for Sadao Yamahana, chairman of Japan's Socialist Party, because of the party's pro-North Korean policy, news reports said Saturday, reports AP.

Quoting an unnamed government source, several Seoul newspapers said the leader of Japan's largest opposition party will not be allowed to come to South Korea despite his party's recent move to improve relations with Seoul.

Russian archives still possess remains of Hitler's skull

MOSCOW, Feb 20: Driven by Josef Stalin's fear that Adolf Hitler was alive, Soviet agents interrogated his aides after World War II and dug up skull fragments in Moscow, Russian media reported Friday, reports AP.

Commonwealth TV showed two flat bones, each about the size of a palm. They have been kept for years in Russian state archives in a cardboard box marked "blue ink," the daily Izvestia said.

The reports were more detailed and persuasive than several other recent accounts of the Soviet Union's frantic search for Hitler's remains in

1945 and 1946. But they still did not answer key questions, such as how Soviet agents concluded that the skull fragments were Hitler's and why the remains have been kept secret.

Historians are likely to remain skeptical that the bones are actually the Nazi leaders.

Most believe Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker on April 29, 1945, together with his wife, Eva Braun. Aides reportedly doused the corpses with gasoline and burned them to prevent them from falling into Soviet hands. The bunker then came under heavy Soviet shelling.

In his landmark book "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich," US author William L. Shirer quoted an eyewitness saying Hitler's remains "were wiped out by the uninterrupted Russian artillery fire."

But the lack of identifiable remains allowed rumors that Hitler had escaped the advancing Soviet army. Among those who remained suspicious was the Soviet dictator, Josef Stalin, Izvestia said.

Izvestia said its account was based on files of the People's Commissariat for Interior Affairs, or NKVD, the forerunner of the KGB and current Security Ministry.

According to the newspaper, the NKVD interrogated Hans Bauer, Hitler's personal pilot; Heinz Lange, his valet; and Otto Günsche, an aide. The investigators spent months trying to obtain confessions that Hitler was alive, but failed to do so.

The NKVD was competing with the Soviet military counter-intelligence agency, Smersh, which had been first to inspect Hitler's bunker and command posts.

Last year, Russian historian Lev Bezymensky said Smersh had found some remains of Hitler, Braun, Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels, and

Chief of Staff Hans Krebs in May 1945. He claimed that dental remains were still being kept in KGB archives.

Izvestia said Smersh refused to cooperate with the NKVD, and so the secret police sent its own investigators to Berlin in May 1946. They found the skull fragments at Hitler's headquarters, the Reich Chancellery.

"While digging at the bottom of the pit... two charred fragments of skull bones were found, one carrying a bullet's exit hole," Izvestia quoted the NKVD dossier as saying.

The Russian government

Ramos requests Kuwaiti Emir to pardon Filipino workers

MANILA, Feb 20: President Fidel Ramos has sent a letter asking Emir of Kuwait Jaber Al-Sabah to pardon Filipino workers jailed there, the Labour Department said here today, reports AP.

The request for the pardons, to be made on Kuwait's national day next month, was contained in a letter carried by Labour Secretary Nieves Confesor, who left Friday for a tour of various foreign countries — including Kuwait, where large numbers of Filipinos work.

Transsexuals allowed to change names

BERLIN: Young people who surgically switch their genders can now legally change first names to match their new sex, Germany's high court ruled Friday, reports AP.

The Constitutional Court ruled unconstitutional a 1980 clause in the German constitution that prevented transsexuals from changing their first names before their 25th birthdays.

The court, based in Karlsruhe, ruled that the law was groundless and discriminatory.

The court based its rulings on appeals by two young women and a young man who wanted to adopt new first names to fit their new genders.

Off the Record

He was greeted with tomatoes

HOBART, Australia: A hail of tomatoes greeted conservative opposition leader John Hewson as he campaigned in this southern city in the run-up to March 13 elections, reports AP.

Police said Hewson was confronted by more than 100 demonstrators as he toured the busy Salamanca Palace markets in the capital of the island state of Tasmania.

The demonstrators had gathered at a rally to protest against woodchipping, Hewson's proposed goods and services tax and the Liberal-National Coalition's industrial relations policy.