

BRIEFLY

Les Aspin hospitalized: Defence Secretary Les Aspin was hospitalized Tuesday with an apparent chest infection and will have a pacemaker implanted to treat his heart condition, the Pentagon said, reports AFP from Washington.

Aspin had complained of a cough for two days and was admitted to the hospital after keeping a previously scheduled appointment with his doctor, the Pentagon said.

Mubarak to visit Britain: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak will visit Britain later this month for talks with Prime Minister John Major on the Middle East peace process, the Egyptian embassy said on Tuesday, reports Reuters from London.

An embassy spokesman said Mubarak would arrive on March 31 for a four-day stay which he described as a working visit, part of a tour of Europe.

He said the chief topic for Mubarak and Major would be the Arab-Israeli peace talks. Due to resume in Washington on April 20, other international and bilateral issues would be raised, he added, without elaborating.

14 killed in US hotel fire: Fire swept through a residence hotel Tuesday, killing 14 people, including three who jumped to their deaths as smoke and flames engulfed the building, authorities said, reports AFP from Chicago.

About 200 firefighters battled the blaze and attended to the victims at the four-storey Paxton Hotel where some of the 130 residents had not been accounted for. Twenty others had been taken to area hospitals.

"The smoke was so intense, I couldn't see the flames, and it was driving people out the windows," said Minnie Byrd, 45, who said she was getting ready to jump from her third-floor room when a fireman got a ladder to her.

Victims lay on the ground, some shouting in pain, while firefighters concentrated on rescuing people rather than putting out the blaze.

Picasso's paintings stolen: Two paintings by Spanish master Pablo Picasso valued at 255,000 marks (160,000 dollars) have been stolen from a gallery in Mannheim, Germany, police said Tuesday, reports AFP.

The pictures — figures, and nude seated with monk — painted respectively in 1927 and 1967 were taken along with several precious Chinese rugs. The total value of the heist was put at 240,000 dollars.

Mobutu won't get French visa: France has refused to issue a visa to President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire who had intended travelling next week to his villa on the Cote d'Azur for further dental treatment, the AFP agency reported in Paris, reports Xinhua.

He had last visited France for treatment in February. Earlier that month, the President had refused a call from France, the United States and Belgium to transfer power to a transitional government following violence in Kinshasa, capital of Zaire.

Thai-Laotian talks on border disputes begin

BANGKOK, Mar 17: Thailand and Laos opened today two days of talks aimed at resolving border disputes, a Foreign Ministry official said, reports AFP.

Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan and his Laotian counterpart Souphanh Sritthirath jointly opened the Thai-Laotian joint boundary committee meeting in the southern Thai resort island of Phuket.

The meeting is likely to discuss the dispute over an area near the Thai village of Ban Ramkiao in Phitsanulok Province, the official said.

Surin told reporters earlier this week that he was optimistic the committee, set up in 1991, would make progress on resolving outstanding border problems and strengthen bilateral economic ties at the talks.

Two Egyptian cops killed in gunbattle with rebels

ASSIUT, Egypt, Mar 17: Two policemen were killed and seven wounded Wednesday in a gunbattle with Muslim extremists, reports AP.

The battle broke out after hundreds of policemen backed by armoured vehicles surrounded two buildings where an unknown number of Muslim extremists were holed up. It continued for at least five hours.

The gunfight began after police besieged a 12-storey apartment block where extremists had barricaded themselves, witnesses and security officials said. Shortly afterward, some extremists slipped into a neighbouring building, which police then surrounded.

Extremist threw at least five explosive devices toward police cordons, officials said. Sharpnel wounded four policemen. Three others were believed wounded by gunshots. Reinforcements were summoned in preparation for storming the two buildings, security officials said. The downtown area in Assiut — a centre of extremist activity for more than a decade — was sealed off.

Hospital spokesmen said two policemen were killed by gunshots. The condition of the wounded police was not known.

There was no immediate word on casualties among the barricaded extremists. At least 16 armoured personnel carriers moved into the area around the buildings, about 500 yards (metres) from Al-Rahma Mosque, a headquarters for Islamic extremists in Assiut.

Militants from Assiut, 200 miles (320 km) south of Cairo, were leaders in stepped-up attacks on police and Christians last year that heralded a new wave of activism against Egypt's secular government.

While voicing regret that the mounting violence and acts of terrorism, Christopher said in a written statement issued March 16 after meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Rabin in Washington. Rabin's spokesman announced that the prime minister was returning home early because of "escalating events" in Israel and the occupied territories.

Japanese MPs ask Ghali to help release Suu Kyi

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 17: A petition signed by nearly half the members of Japan's Diet (parliament), which calls for improvements in human rights in Myanmar and the release of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, was submitted to the United Nations on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

The petition was signed by 354 parliamentarians from various parties and was organised by Satsuki Eda of the United Social Democratic Party.

Addressed to Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, it asked him to do everything in his power to persuade the military government of Myanmar to permit the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners.



The petitioners expressed

particular concern about 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for nearly four years despite the victory of her National League for Democracy in 1990 elections.

The Secretary-General was also asked to press for the swift and complete implementation of a transition to civilian rule in Myanmar.

The petition was handed to Chinmaya Gharekhan, a senior political adviser to Boutros-Ghali, who was in Boston on Tuesday to receive an award.

Another report says: After more than two years of delay, Japan will finally disburse a 100 million loan to Russia to help it meet basic human needs, a government official said today.

Japan's Export-Import Bank will grant Moscow the low-interest loan for buying food and medicine from Japanese firms under a bilateral agreement signed last October, an Ex-Im Bank official said.

"Now that we have received a letter of guarantee from the Russian government, the loan pledged in December 1990 will be disbursed soon," he said.

"This will pave the way for additional Ex-Im Bank loans to get moving, he added.

70 killed as Georgian troops Abkhazian rebels clash

MOSCOW, Mar 17: Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze said on Tuesday at least 70 people had been killed overnight in an offensive by Abkhazian rebels against the Black Sea town of Sukhumi, according to local journalists, reports Reuters.

Shevardnadze told them that rebels had used warplanes with Russian airforce markings to bomb Sukhumi in what he suggested was a full-scale campaign against the capital of Georgia's rebel region of Abkhazia.

Georgia will never allow attempts on its independence, however many victims are needed to safeguard this, ITAR-Tass news agency quoted him as saying in Sukhumi.

It said he sharply criticised reactionary forces and military leaders in Russia, whose ac-

tions in Georgia showed they were determined to discredit both Russia's democratic movement and its president.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin suffered a series of humiliating defeat at the hands of his conservative-dominated supreme legislature last week.

They have left him unprotected if the mutinous Congress of Peoples Deputies moves to strip him of his powers at its next session in June.

The Speaker of Georgia's Parliament, Vakhtang Goguaдзе, told Deputies that Shevardnadze had said in a telephone call from Sukhumi that 50 civilians had been killed in the town and 100 houses destroyed in air and artillery attacks.

Goguaдзе quoted Shevardnadze as saying at least 20 Georgian soldiers were

killed and Abkhazian losses were huge. Sukhumi is currently in Georgian hands.

Shevardnadze accused Russian troops before leaving for Sukhumi of backing the separatist against the town.

"After today's events I can say that we are facing a conflict between Georgia and Russia," he told the Georgian Parliament before leaving the capital Tbilisi.

In Moscow, the Defence Ministry said Russian troops stationed in the region remained neutral.

A spokesman said troops deployed in Abkhazia had been put on high alert. They had been ordered to shoot to kill to rebuff any armed attack, irrespective of the nationality of the attackers.

Iranian dissident shot dead in Rome

ROME, Mar 17: Hitmen riding a scooter shot dead an opponent of the Iranian government in the streets of Rome yesterday state television said, reports Reuters.

State TV said the attackers sped off and disappeared in rush hour traffic. Police could not immediately confirm that the man, identified as Mohammed Hussein Nagdi, had died while being rushed to hospital in an ambulance.

Nagdi was shot as he walked in an outlying part of Rome.

Two gunmen, riding a scooter, pulled up to him and one of them opened fire with a submachine gun.

News agency reports said Nagdi was the representative of the Iranian National Resistance Council, dominated by the Mujahideen guerrilla movement opposed to the Tehran government.

The organisation's Rome offices were not responding to telephone calls.

China wants to end tension in Korean peninsula

BEIJING, Mar 17: China said today that it was working to relax tension in the Korean peninsula, which has mounted since Beijing's Protege North Korea pulled out of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, reports AFP.

"We hope that all the parties concerned will create conditions ... to promote the continued relaxation of tension and the stability in the Korean peninsula," a Foreign Ministry official said.

"We have been working towards this end," he said. The official added in what was seen as a warning to Pyongyang not to abandon the treaty. "It is in the common in-

terest of the countries in the region to realize denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and to properly settle the current question."

China is North Korea's last remaining communist patron following the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Beijing is also generally considered to be the only country to have some influence over the the Stalinist-style state.

North Korea's announcement last week that it was pulling out of the treaty was condemned by South Korea, Japan and the United States, and fueled speculation that North Korea was working on a nuclear bomb.

Turkish Kurds ready for ceasefire

BEIRUT, Mar 17: The leader of Kurdish rebels in Turkey is ready for a cease-fire to end his nine-year guerrilla war for a separate state, he said in an interview published Wednesday, reports AP.

The offer by Abdullah Ocalan, the Marxist leader of the Kurdish Workers Party or PKK, came after Turkish troops badly mauled his guerrillas in a major campaign launched in October.

Ocalan also has lost the logistical backing of Syria and Iran, who scaled back their support for his group last year under Turkish pressure.

The interview was published by the London-based, Lebanese-run Al-Hayat daily hours before a news conference Ocalan scheduled in east Lebanon's Bekaa alley to explain his offer.

The PKK since 1984 has been waging a guerrilla war for Kurdish self-rule in southeast Turkey, home for about half of the world's 25 million Kurds. About 6,000 people have been killed.

Pindi buying spares of F-16s from US market

ISLAMABAD, Mar 17: Pakistan is purchasing spares of F-16s from the US commercial market, Pakistan Federal Minister for Defence Production Hazaar Khan Bijarani said here, reports Xinhua.

He said that Pakistan is meeting its needs for F-16 fighter jets from the US commercial sources as it is not supplied under the US assistance programme

Soviet docs carried out Hitler's post-mortem on wrong body

PARIS, Mar 17: Soviet doctors who carried out Hitler's post-mortem in Berlin worked on the wrong body, according to a study by French forensic experts published on Tuesday by the daily newspaper Le Monde, reports Reuters.

The experts, from Lille University, said Soviet leader Stalin had requested to urgently see Hitler's body after his Berlin bunker fell to Soviet forces in May 1945.

For fear of his wrath, Soviet army officers picked up the most charred body among those found near the bunker as likely to be Hitler's. Soviet doctors hurried to carry out a post-mortem.

The post-mortem report was like a mark of authenticity, the French study said.

The experts said the body of Hitler, who had committed suicide on April 30, was in fact discovered two weeks later and identified by a German soldier.

"The real body was lost for some 15 days, forcing the identification committee in the meantime to resort to a trick to answer demands by Stalin who wanted to urgently see Hitler's body", the study said.

The identity of the first body, which was taken to Russia, was never ascertained and where the genuine body ended up remained a mystery, it added.

The study said the Soviet doctors had scattered in their report small errors that only

scientists could make out, as though they had wanted to drop hints to colleagues that they were acting under military orders.

For example, while mentioning 15 upper teeth, they only described 14.

Another fact casting doubt on the identity of the body was that it had only one testicle, a fact which had never been mentioned by Hitler's doctors.

Russian historians said last month they had found in Moscow state archives a fragment of Hitler's skull and new documents ending any doubts about the fate of the Nazi leader.

The experts said examination of the fragment may verify their findings.

Mitterrand meets Gorbachev

MOSCOW, Mar 17: French President Francois Mitterrand met privately Tuesday with former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, the architect of Perestroika, reports AFP.

The two met behind closed doors at the French embassy residence before Mitterrand headed for a dinner at the Kremlin.

No details emerged about the contents of their conversation.

Mitterrand and Gorbachev, who know each other well, last met in late 1991, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Blast damages hotel in Greece

RIODES, Greece, Mar 17: A hotel was seriously damaged late Tuesday by a home-made bomb containing a large amount of dynamite, police said, reports AFP.

The device exploded on the ground floor of the Elena Hotel in the centre of the island. No-one was hurt in the blast as the hotel was shut in this part of the season.

Initial police reports blamed the attack on rivals of the hotel owner.

Pak Jamaat denies Uzbekh charge

ISLAMABAD, Mar 17: A Pakistani Islamic Party on Tuesday denied a charge by Uzbekistan that it was fomenting unrest in Central Asia and complained of a worldwide campaign to defame Muslims, reports Reuters.

There is not an iota of truth in this," Jamaat-i-Islami chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed said of the charge.

Off the Record

Blind may be able to watch TV

LONDON: The blind may soon be able to "watch" television, thanks to technology unveiled Tuesday by the head of research at Britain's Royal National Institute for the Blind, a press report said yesterday, reports AFP.

Dr John Gill told the Daily Telegraph newspaper that many blind or partially-sighted people were unable to follow action sequences on television by listening to sound alone.

But in the system under development, an actor describes the looks and deeds of the characters during gaps in the dialogue, he said.

"We have been doing some trial transmission (the detective series) the bill," said Gill. "It has lot of visual cues and the dialogue does not tell the whole story."

He said a decoder to use the system, already used in some theatres, would cost around 200 pounds (280 dollars), but a spare television sound channel needed to be identified before it could be introduced.

Solar Kiwi completes historical journey

WELLINGTON: Solar Kiwi, New Zealand's first solar car has completed a historical journey of 1,928 km from Cape Reinga, the northern most corner of the country, to the southernmost bluff in about 20 days, reports Xinhua.

The Solar Kiwi will be New Zealand's entry to the world solar challenge from Darwin to Adelaide in Australia late this year.

Team leader Stewart Lister was confident the car would be a top 10 prospect out of 78 entries in the 3,006 km world solar race and would achieve he expected top speed to more than 100 km/h, according to local media sources yesterday.

During improvements and modifications this week, the car will lose its weight to just 150 kg and will be added carbon composite front wheels for better aerodynamics and strength.

Dewi Sukarno sues NY lawyer

ASPEN, Colorado, Mar 17: Former Indonesian first lady Dewi Sukarno is suing the high-powered New York lawyer she hired to defend her in a 1992 wineglass-slashing incident, alleging his 900,000 US dollars fee was too high, reports Reuters.

The suit, filed on Monday against lawyer Barry Slothnick in Pitkin county district court in Colorado, claims Slothnick did not charge her "reasonable and customary legal fees."

Sukarno was accused of slashing the face of fellow socialite Victoria Osmena at a January 2, 1992, dinner party in the SKI resort of Aspen.

Osmena, the grand daughter of a former Philippine president, received 37 stitches and had a shard of glass removed from her cheek.

Trial of a Muslim militant starts in Indonesia

JAKARTA, Mar 17: The subversion trial of a former leader of a Muslim militant group has started at an Indonesian court in nearby Tangerang, press reports said today, reports AFP.

The Tangerang district court Monday accused Mochamad Rais Abas, 67, of subversion of having spread enmity, disunity, chaos and unrest among the population, the Kompas Daily said.

Abas, a retired army private, was the Jakarta area military commander of the Islamic State of Indonesia (NII) Movement which aims at turning the republic into a Muslim state, the prosecution said.

Christopher urges parties to return to Arab-Israeli talks

WASHINGTON, Mar 17: Warning that violence and terrorism "will never work," Secretary of State Warren Christopher has urged the all parties to the Middle East peace process to return to the negotiating table in Washington April 20, reports AP.

"We are deeply troubled by the mounting violence and acts of terrorism," Christopher said in a written statement issued March 16 after meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Rabin in Washington.

Rabin's spokesman announced that the prime minister was returning home early because of "escalating events" in Israel and the occupied territories.

While voicing regret that Rabin had to cut short his US visit, Christopher said he and President Clinton were "very pleased with the positive tone and substance of our discussions with the prime minister."

Clinton conferred with Rabin for more than three hours March 15 at the White House.

"We reviewed the results of the very productive talks we had on a broad range of issues and how we plan to follow up on these discussions to enhance our close bilateral relationship and move forward on the Arab-Israeli peace process," Christopher said.

"The peace process provides us with the best opportunity to build this new Middle East," he said. "We call on all in the region to look to the future and seize this historic opportunity for peace."

Christopher said those who carry out acts of violence "are seeking to undermine the

hopes and prospects for peace. They won't succeed," he declared. "Violence and terrorism don't work and will never work: negotiations do work and can produce peace and reconciliation. In this respect, we urge all the parties to return to the negotiations on April 20."

Earlier this month, the United States and Russia, co-sponsors of the Middle East peace process, invited Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians — the participants in the Arab-Israeli talks — to a ninth round of direct peace negotiations beginning April 20 in Washington. The talks have been in recess since last December.

So far, only Israel has accepted the invitation. Some Palestinian spokesmen have said they will not return to the negotiating table until some 400 Palestinian deportees in southern Lebanon have been allowed to return their homes in the occupied territories and Israel pledges to abandon the policy of deportation.

However, US officials have expressed hope that all parties will be present when the talks scheduled to resume April 20.

AFP adds: Egypt on Tuesday warned that the Palestinians would be the losers if they boycotted the next round of Arab-Israeli peace talks.

Foreign Minister Amr Mousa said it "would not be in their interest" to boycott the talks over Israel's expulsion of 400 Palestinians to Lebanon in December.

"The real problem is the issue of land and peace, the attainment of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and not the issue of the deportees," Mousa said during a press conference.

The deportees "are only an obstacle and should not compromise the Palestinian right to self-determination," he added. But Egypt "understands the Palestinian position and is trying to settle the problem."

President Hosni Mubarak visits Washington early next month.

15 pc children undernourished in Yugoslavia

BELGRADE, Mar 17: An estimated 15 per cent of children in sanctions-hit Yugoslavia are undernourished, a United Nations food expert was quoted as saying on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Miladin Mitrilov of the Rome-based UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) told Tanjug news agency that due to a sharp drop in living standards several cities in Yugoslavia had begun to operate soup-kitchens for the first time since World War two.

Mitrilov said last year's severe drought had sharply reduced yields of all crops.