

Athulathmudali's supporters rough up govt officials

COLOMBO, Apr 26: Thousands of angry mourners roughed up government figures who tried to pay respects to assassinated opposition leader Lalith Athulathmudali amid charges that the ruling party was behind the slaying.

Crowds booed senior police and defence officials as well as lower rung government politicians who tried to enter Athulathmudali's residence here, witnesses said today.

"There is a limit to how we can protect these government people because the crowds are very restless. They believe the government is responsible for the assassination," a family member told AFP.

She said Defence Secretary

Li Peng hospitalized

BEIJING, Apr 26: Chinese Premier Li Peng has been hospitalized with a cold and cancelled a Monday afternoon meeting with visiting Philippine President Fidel Ramos, a spokesman said, reports AP.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Wu Jianmin refused to give any other information.

"There's no point in making a variety of speculations about it," Wu said. "He's just got a cold. That's very common."

The Philippine undersecretary for foreign affairs, Rodolfo Severino, said the delegation was informed of the cancellation Monday morning, just before Ramos met with Jiang Zemin, the Communist Party general secretary and president.

Severino said they were told that Li, 64, was hospitalized, but did not know when.

Serb parliament rejects international peace plan

BIJELJINA, Bosnia, Apr 26: The Bosnian Serb parliament ignored the pleas of Belgrade leaders and unanimously rejected a UN peace plan today, triggering tough new sanctions against Serb-led Yugoslavia, reports Reuter.

Defiant legislators cast their votes minutes after the expiry of a 6 am (0400 GMT) deadline set by peace envoy David Owen for acceptance of his plan to end the year-long civil war. The plan would divide Bosnia into 10 Muslim, Serb and Croat cantons.

Reinforced sanctions now threaten the Yugoslav republics of Serbia and Montenegro with economic catastrophe. Lord Owen said he believed they would automatically take effect within 24 hours.

Owen said as he left Belgrade to fly to Geneva that the decision meant "confrontation with Europe is now inevitable."

He added that he could not rule out the use of military force within the framework of the United Nations charter to maintain peace.

Radovan Karadzic, President of the self-proclaimed Serb republic, told reporters "parliament could not accept the plan and decided to hold a referendum. The people will decide."

Legislators brushed aside a joint letter from Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and the Presidents of Yugoslavia and Montenegro urging them to endorse cantonal maps drawn by Owen and co-mediator Cyrus Vance.

"This is not a time to compete in patriotism — it is a

time for a carefully deliberated, far-sighted and courageous decision," the letter stated. "An unnecessary war can bring nothing but evil and suffering."

Milosevic, who exerted strong pressure throughout the weekend on the Bosnian Serbs and suffered an extraordinary public defeat, sent Yugoslav Foreign Minister Vladislav Jovanovic as a personal emissary to the Parliament session.

"We demand that you sign the maps," Jovanovic was heard telling the tumultuous closed door session.

"These are probably the most difficult words of my life but I would not have uttered them if I were not convinced they were for the benefit of the Serb people. We hope we can achieve our goals through different means."

Despite the drama of the rejection, which brings closer the risk of air strikes in Bosnia by the west, legislators were elated by the outcome.

Bosnian Serb Foreign Minister Alexander Buha told reporters: "Why should such a decision come as a surprise? The Parliament of a sovereign nation has the right to decide on its own fate."

Information Minister Miroslav Toholj said the referendum would be held on May 15 and 16 and added "We made it clear that we reject the plan and the maps but we also want the people to endorse it."

Karadzic claimed acceptance of the plan would have forced 800,000 Serbs to flee Cantons controlled by Muslims and Croats.



British UNPROFOR soldiers recover the body of a Muslim from the ruins of a bombed house Sunday. The European Community agreed for the first time in a Foreign Ministers' meeting in Denmark to consider eventual military action against Serb forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina. — AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record

He has sometimes spread himself too thin

BOSTON: President Clinton, nearing the 100-day mark in his presidency, said Sunday he has sometimes spread himself too thin and needs to focus on a few big issues at the time, reports AP.

In an interview with The Boston Globe aboard Air Force One, the president acknowledged that he has had his problems in the White House, partly because he was accustomed to doing things differently when he was governor of Arkansas.

"I do think that I may have overextended myself, and we've got to focus on big things," Clinton said.

"I'm used to a legislative environment where, as governor, I worked up all these initiatives, I put them into the pot and then we worked them through the legislature," he said.

In the three months of his presidency, however, Clinton said he has learned that "my job as president is to keep the focus of the American people on the bigger issues that are at stake and to make sure they're keeping the focus of the Congress on that so that we don't get into the kind of political game-playing we had in the last week."



Poverty forces father to sell kids

BEIJING: An unemployed man in rural southwestern China who sold his two baby sons was sentenced to four years in prison, a police gazette reported, reports Reuter.

At Bingsheng of Sichuan Province arranged soon after the birth of his first son to sell the child through a middleman.

When his wife, a deaf-mute, gave birth again, Ai promptly sold the infant off, the April 24 edition of China Procuratorate news said. He made a total of 6,200 yuan (dollar 1,000).

The sale of boys in a growing scourge in the Chinese countryside, where a high premium is placed on male heirs. Many of the children sold are kidnapped from their homes.

BRIEFLY

Tamil Tigers kill five: Tamil Tiger guerrillas ambushed a group of policemen in eastern Sri Lanka, killing four constables and a woman bystander, the military said today, reports AFP from Colombo.

Gunmen from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), fired at the policemen who were on a routine patrol at Welikanda Sunday, killing the four men instantly, the spokesman said. "A woman who was walking down the road was hit by LTTE fire and died instantly," the spokesman said.

The LTTE are leading a long-drawn guerrilla campaign to establish an independent Tamil homeland in the island's northern and eastern regions where the two million Tamil minority is concentrated.

Hizbollah rebels rocket Israel: Guerrillas fired four Matyusha rockets at northern Israel on Sunday, security sources in the Jewish state's south Lebanon "security zone" said, reports Reuter from Lebanon.

They said the rockets were launched from an area just north of the security zone where guerrillas of the pro-Iranian Hizbollah (Party of God) are active.

Israeli and allied South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia gunners responded by firing 155-mm shells at Yater, a village near Zibzigne from where the Katyushas were launched.

There was no immediate word on casualties in the rocket assault or the retaliatory shelling.

15 killed in Lankan bus plunge: A crowded bus carrying office workers plunged into a river in southern Sri Lanka today, killing at least 15 passengers and injuring several more, police said, AFP reports from Colombo.

The bus hit a bridge and fell into the river at Wellithenna in the district of Kalutara, police said, adding that rescue workers recovered 15 bodies so far and a search was still on for several more missing passengers.

In a similar accident Sunday, six passengers were killed in northern Sri Lanka when their mini bus plunged into a river while they were returning after paying respects to a slain opposition leader here.

Yemen holds assembly polls: Yemen today holds its first full legislative elections, taking another step toward democracy since unification of the country three years ago, reports AFP from Sanna.

Yemen, which has allowed political parties and freedom of expressing since north and south Yemen united in May 1990, will become the second state on the Arabian peninsula — after Kuwait — to have an elected assembly.

But opposition members warn that the risk of vote tampering is high, despite the presence of foreign observers.

Pope ends Albania tour: Pope John Paul left Tirana for Rome late on Sunday after a one-day visit to Albania during which he celebrated Mass in the northern city of Shkoder and inaugurated four new bishops, Tirana airport said, reports Reuter from Tirana.

The Pope praised the spiritual strength of Albanians who kept their faith despite brutal repression by the late dictator Enver Hoxha, who declared the country an atheist state in 1967.

Speaking later in Tirana's packed Scanderbeg Square, he appealed for an end to "intolerant and aggressive nationalism that today mows down its victims and fans the flames of ferocious hate" — an apparent reference to Albania's northern neighbour, Yugoslavia.

ME peace talks resume today

NICOSIA, Apr 26: The Arabs and Israelis will begin the ninth round of peace talks in Washington tomorrow, aided by a new US administration determined to play a more active role in the process, reports AFP.

The last round ended December 17, the day Israel expelled 415 Palestinians to south Lebanon and triggered the longest rupture since the peace negotiations opened in Madrid in October 1991.

It took four months of bargaining to lure the Palestinians back to the peace table even though Israel did not take back

all the deportees and end repression in the occupied territories, sealed for almost a month.

But Israel agreed to repatriate all the deportees by the end of the year, take back others expelled previously, and allowed Faisal Husseini to join the negotiating team even though he is resident of east Jerusalem.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin also said two weeks ago in Ismailia, Egypt, that UN Security Council Resolution 242 will apply to the Palestinians when negotiations begin for the final status

of the occupied territories.

The Arabs received from the new US administration a reaffirmation of the principles on which former US Secretary of State James Baker launched the peace process in 1991.

His successor Warren Christopher repeated that the negotiations are based on Resolution 242, which calls for Israel to return some or all of the territories it occupied in 1967 in exchange for peace.

Christopher also said the political rights of the Palestinians must be respected and that everyone should live in security in the Middle East.

China for reunification with Taiwan

SINGAPORE, Apr 26: China is offering peaceful reunification with Taiwan, the chief Chinese negotiator to this week's historic talks between the two sides said on Sunday, reports Reuter.

"We stand for peaceful reunification," said Wang Daohan, Chairman of Beijing's Association for Relations Across the

Taiwan Straits (ARATS) at a news conference shortly after arriving in Singapore.

"As both sides share the wish to develop cross-strait relations and realise peaceful reunification, there is nothing that we cannot sit down and talk about," said Wang, a high-ranking communist party official.

Wang is in Singapore to meet his Taiwanese counterpart, Koo Chen-Fu, who heads the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF), for two days of talks from April 27-28.

The meeting will be the highest-level contact between China and Taiwan since the Chinese civil war in 1949.

ARATS and SEF are both

semi-official organisations, set up in 1991 by the Beijing and Taipei governments to handle relations between the two countries. Taipei had previously refused to deal with Beijing after China's communist government drove the nationalists to the island from the mainland.

The talks have been seen as the start of possible breakthrough in reunification.

"The talks, though of an unofficial, economic, business and functional nature, mark an important step in relations across the straits," Wang said.

Both Taipei and Beijing say Taiwan will one day be reunited with mainland China but each insists that reunification must take place on its own terms.

China has refused to renounce the use of military force to unite Taiwan to the mainland, while Taiwan has said that China must also implement democratic reforms before reunification talks.

Senior delegates from SEF and ARATS met in Singapore last week to hammer out details of a joint document that Wang and Koo will sign and issues for discussion, including Taiwanese investment protection, intellectual property rights and legal and economic cooperation between China and Taiwan.



KARACHI, Pakistan: A paramilitary soldier, ready with his gun, stands guard outside the Islamic foreign ministers' conference hall on the occasion of the 21st Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers which began here Sunday. — AFP/UNB photo

Imelda pleads not guilty to graft charges

MANILA, Apr 26: Imelda Marcos pleaded not guilty Monday to charges she used public funds to finance a private corporation while she served in the Cabinet of her husband, the late President Ferdinand Marcos, reports AP.

"I deny all the allegations," Mrs. Marcos said after a clerk read the charges during arraignment at the Sandiganbayan anti-graft court.

Her co-accused in the case, former deputy minister of human settlements, Conrado Benitez, was not present.

Government prosecutors said that in 1977, Mrs. Marcos, then minister of human settlements, and Benitez used \$800,000 of coconut levy funds to establish the Technology Resource Center Foundation, Inc, a private firm engaged in real estate deals.

The money was originally intended for a scholarship programme for children of coconut farmers, they said.

Prosecutors said Mrs. Marcos and Benitez violated laws on the use of public funds and a ban on public officials engaging in private business.

They filed a separate criminal fraud suit against the two with a regional trial court.

The graft suit is one of 14 criminal cases against Mrs. Marcos in the anti-graft court.



She faces 32 civil suits in the same court and 47 other criminal cases in other courts.

Ramos seeks OIC support for peace accord with MNLF

MANILA, Apr 26: Philippine President Fidel Ramos is calling on Islamic nations to support his efforts to negotiate a peace settlement with Muslim separatists in the south of the country, the Presidential Palace said today, reports AFP.

Ramos has written to World Muslim League Secretary-General Abdullah Omar Nasseef to endorse Manila's initiative at the ongoing annual meeting of the organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Karachi, a palace statement said.

Exiled Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) founder Nur Misuari, who led an unsuccessful secessionist revolt in the 1970s on the southern island of Mindanao, held preliminary talks with Philippine government representatives in Jakarta earlier

this month.

The two sides have agreed to hold formal peace negotiations in June, but Misuari, who is attending the OIC conference as an observer, told AFP in Karachi on Sunday he would not come here for peace talks because he feared assassination.

"It is difficult to cope with the problem of dissidence in Mindanao without the understanding and sympathy of friends in the Muslim world," Ramos told the world Muslim League leader, according to the statement.

"It would be a tremendous help to bringing about enduring peace and development in the southern part of the Philippines if the OIC could see its way to supporting the position of the Philippine government," Ramos said.

Dutch drug trafficker to die in Singapore

SINGAPORE, Apr 26: Singapore's High Court sentenced a Dutch engineer to death today, for heroin trafficking — the first Caucasian to receive the sentence under the island-state's strict drug laws, a police spokesman said, reports Reuter.

Johannes Van Damme (56) was arrested at Changi Airport on September 27, '91, and charged with transporting 4.92 kg (10.4 pounds) of heroin in a bag on a trip from Bangkok to Athens.

Cambodians want to rid country of Vietnamese

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, Apr 26: Thousands of ethnic Vietnamese have fled after massacres blamed on Khmer Rouge guerrillas, but Cambodian politicians do not condemn the killings. Instead, they urge all Vietnamese to leave, reports AP.

Although the rhetoric is part of the campaign for next month's elections, it reflects a historic animosity among Cambodians for their dominant neighbour.

"I am happy to see these Vietnamese people go back to their own country," said Kao Kong, 56, a driver. "I hate Vietnamese people."

Centuries of territorial conflict, including the loss to Vietnam of the fertile Mekong Delta 200 years ago, are at the root of the bitterness.

During 11 years of occupation that began with an invasion in December 1978, Cambodians hated the Vietnamese soldiers even though they overthrew a Khmer Rouge regime that had slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people.

The Khmer Rouge fought the Vietnamese-installed government until the signing of an agreement in 1991 that brought in UN peacekeepers.

attracted thousands of Vietnamese immigrants. Most Cambodians seem to resent the migrants more than they do the tens of thousands of ethnic Vietnamese who have lived here for generations.

Vietnam's embassy estimates 150,000 ethnic Vietnamese live in Cambodia, among a population of about 9 million.

Since the UN peacekeeping mission began a year ago, more than 80 Vietnamese have been shot, stabbed with axes and spears or killed in grenade attacks.

country, many in convoys of rickety houseboats down the Tonle Sap River, which flows past the capital.

Cambodia's 20 political parties have used the Vietnamese issue in their campaign against government for the May 23-28 elections being organized by UN peacekeepers.

The two main parties tried to conceal their delight at the exodus of Vietnamese, but nonetheless urged those remaining to flee for their own safety.

"Nobody actually can protect the Vietnamese residents in Cambodia," said Sam Rainay, a senior official the party that

supports Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who once ruled Cambodia and is now head of state.

If elected, the politicians say, they will "invite" any Vietnamese who entered the country after the invasion to leave, then expel any who refuse to go. Only those with immigration papers would be allowed to return.

"Now, there are no controls," said Ieng Mouly, a leader of the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party, the other major opposition group. "We're supposed to be the owners of the country. This creates frustration."

Iraqi agents held in Kuwait

KUWAIT, Apr 26: Kuwait said today, it had arrested a group of Iraqi agents who planned to carry out what it called terrorist acts "aimed at shaking the security and stability" of the Emirate, reports Reuter.

Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Abdulaziz Al-Dakhil said in a statement the group had been interrogated and a quantity of arms and explosives had been confiscated.

Dakhil said Defence Minister Sheikh Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah had made a report on the incident to a meeting of the cabinet late on Sunday evening.