

International

BRIEFLY

Mubarak starts Gulf tour: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Sunday began talks in Oman at the start of a Gulf tour expected to focus on an alleged threat from Iran to Arab states, AFP reports from Muscat.

Mubarak met in Muscat with Sultan Qaboos, the Omani news agency reported without disclosing details of the talks. He will later visit Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"The real threat in the region is Iran," Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nagui Al Ghatrifi told AFP, adding that the Arabs must map out a common strategy to confront events both regionally and internationally.

He said the tour was to find ways to thwart Iran's "ambition to dominate" the Middle East.

Iran's drive against Kurds on: The Iranian army continued an offensive in northern Iraq Sunday against members of the Iranian Kurdish opposition, the Vice-Minister for the Interior of the self-proclaimed Iraqi Kurdish state said.

Speaking to AFP in Arbil, headquarters of the Iraqi Kurdish entity, Ahmad Sherif Ali said the Iranian army had since mid-April held positions three to four kilometres (two or three miles) inside Iraqi territory.

The incursions near the localities of Qala Diza and Penjwin had caused 5,000 Iraqi Kurdish families to flee, he said.

Iranian artillery fire, which had lessened in recent days, had not caused fatalities, but had left a number of wounded, Ahmad Sherif Ali said. He did not give a precise number.

UNITA blames army for attack: UNITA rebels Sunday accused the army of launching an offensive to retake a guerrilla-held diamond mining region as peace talks have come to a standstill, reports AFP from Luanda.

The UNITA radio station quoted a statement by the UNITA military command as saying guerrilla and government forces had clashed several times over the weekend in the Luanda area, Angola's second richest diamond-mining zone.

During one of the battles a government helicopter was hit, the command said without providing details. It said the overall offensive was mounted by special commando forces.

Eight drown in Bihar: At least eight people drowned and several were missing Sunday after the boat in which they were sailing capsized in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported, says AFP from New Delhi.

Survivors said 17 of the 50 people on the boat were missing after it sank in the Ganges river in Bihar's Saran district. So far, 25 people have been rescued from the fast-flowing river, PTI added.

Filipino troops kill 28 kidnappers

BASILAN, May 10: Government troops pursuing Muslims who had kidnapped a Spanish priest killed 28 in weekend clashes, officials said Monday. A soldier was also killed in one gun battle, reports AP.

The priest, the Rev. Bernardo Blanco, 65, of Zamora province in Spain, escaped last Wednesday after 48 days of captivity. The military then ordered a full-scale attack on the kidnappers.

Mayor Leonardo Pioquinto of the capital town of Isabela on Basilan island said 18 kidnappers were killed in a clash Friday in nearby Kapayawan town. Isabela is about 880 kilometres (550 miles) south of Manila.

Another nine kidnappers were slain Sunday in another village in Kapayawan, said Christopher Puno, a spokesman for the provincial government. Puno said a marine corporal died in the same clash.

Another body was recovered by a village official at another site, also in Kapayawan, the military said.

Blanco was abducted March 18 by Muslim bandits but was turned over to a group of Muslim fundamentalists after negotiations for his freedom bogged down over ransom.

The kidnappers are still holding 5-year-old Anthony Biel, who was kidnapped earlier than Blanco.

Athulathmudali's killing DUNF rejects police claim

COLOMBO, May 10: A Sri Lankan opposition party today rejected a police claim identifying the assassin of former National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali and renewed a charge that the government was responsible, reports AFP.

Athulathmudali's Democratic United National Front (DUNF) told reporters today they were not satisfied with the police investigation into the April 23 assassination and the police version of the assassin's identity.

Three days after the brutal assassination of our leader we accused the government of his murder. We confirm and reiterate that accusation," DUNF spokesman Wickrema Weerasorly told reporters today.

The police Crime Detective Bureau (CDB) identified the gunman who killed Athulathmudali at an election meeting here as Kandiah Ragunathan from the island's northern Jaffna peninsula where Tamil Tiger guerrillas are active. Police have blamed the

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for Athulathmudali's killing and said the Tigers were also prime suspects in the May Day assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

The CDB has identified Premadasa's assassin as Kulaweerasingham Veerakumar also from the Jaffna peninsula.

"They (CDB) have positively identified both assassins and they were trying to ascertain whether they belonged to any terrorist group," the state-run Sunday Observer said. The Tigers have denied involvement.

The government called in Britain's Scotland Yard to investigate the Athulathmudali's murder. The Yard detectives left the island over the weekend after completing their inquiries, diplomatic sources said.

"They will make a final report to the Sri Lankan police," the source said. Scotland Yard was called in by President Premadasa a few days before he himself was assassinated by a suicide bomber.

Soldier killed in Sindh blasts

KARACHI, May 10: One para-military soldier died and more than a dozen people were injured Sunday in a series of blasts in Pakistan's troubled southern province of Sindh, officials said, reports AFP.

Half of the victims sustained injuries when unidentified men hurled locally-made low intensity grenades from a car in Hyderabad, 150 kilometres (90 miles) north of here, police said.

Two of the attackers were arrested, but police did not disclose their identities.

Explosions were also reported in the towns of Dadu, Sanghar and Naosheero Feroz and Shahdadpur in central Sindh.

The para-military soldier in hospital.

Rich Asian states relaxing restrictions on foreigners' entry

MANILA, May 10: Pressed by worsening labour shortages, prosperous Asian countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are slowly relaxing restrictions on the entry of foreign workers and legitimising their stay, reports IPS.

But they are being overwhelmed by thousands of Asian jobseekers, who are now turning increasingly to countries within the region as the demand for labour in the Middle East, Europe and the United States wanes.

Asia's rich countries are thus likely to continue hosting large numbers of undocumented and unprotected workers from neighbouring countries, vulnerable to abuse and subject to harsher working conditions.

The case of Japan is perhaps the best known. With its rapidly graying population, Asia's economic giant is suffering from worsening labour shortages. A 1991 Labour Ministry report said Japan would be short of about 5.2 million workers in 1995 and 9.1 million in 2010.

Fearful of the political and social repercussions of having large numbers of foreign work-

EC for increased pressure on Bosnian Serbs

UN team finds Zepa deserted

SARAJEVO, May 10: A team of UN military observers has found the eastern Bosnian town of Zepa virtually deserted, with most of its houses wrecked and burnt, a United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) spokesman said today, reports AFP.

The five observers entered Zepa, which the UN Security Council declared a "safe area" last week, on Sunday evening to find only some 50 residents of the estimated 25,000 population, said Commander Barry Frewer.

The rest of Zepa's Muslim residents and refugees are presumed to have taken refuge in the mountains and caves during last week's heavy bombardment by Bosnian Serb forces.

The UN team found ten corpses in a mosque, and some wounded. Frewer said he had no information how the persons had died, but the wounded did not require immediate evacuation.

While Zepa, which lies at the bottom of an inaccessible valley, was quiet, the team

heard sounds of sporadic artillery fire in the region, Frewer reported.

AP from Brussels says: The European Community, seeking to increase pressure on the Bosnian Serbs, planned Monday to bring its approach to the war in Bosnia more in line with US policy.

But the 12 EC foreign ministers were unlikely at their meeting to agree on action that would military intervention in the conflict, a measure suggested by the United States, officials said.

Instead, they were expected to examine Serbia's commitment to isolating the Bosnian Serbs and ways of helping Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic step up pressure on his allies.

"The emphasis now is on pressure on Bosnian Serbs via Serbia," said British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd. He stressed the EC need to test Milosevic's willingness to ostracize his allies in Bosnia.

Milosevic pledged last week to halt all aid to Bosnia's Serbs except food and medicine after their repeated refusal to accept an international peace plan. The decision was seen as an attempt to persuade the international community to lift or ease economic sanctions which have crippled the Yugoslav economy, and state off Western military intervention.

The ministers were expected to explore tougher measures against the Bosnian Serbs, the lone holdouts against the peace plan, without making military commitments.

"We have always said that military intervention in those countries will not bring any solution," Greek Foreign Minister Michail Papaconstantinou told the British Broadcasting Corporation.

The United States, however, wants stronger action as soon as possible to stop bloodshed in the fledgling Balkan nation.

President Clinton has advocated a tougher line against Bosnian Serbs, including possible air strikes and arming the mainly Muslim Bosnian government.



Sarajevo's Muslim children offer flowers to a young Ukrainian soldier Sunday to express their gratitude for protecting the besieged town of Zepa for which he is about to depart. —AFP/UNB photo

Formation of Liberty angers Saudi royals

NICOSIA, May 10: Saudi Arabia has voiced its anger over the creation by Saudi scholars of a human rights group to fight what they said was oppression and injustice, a London-based association said Sunday, reports AFP.

Liberty, an independent group which specialises in the defence and promotion of human rights and democratic reforms in Muslim countries, said the leaders of the Saudi group were summoned Saturday by the Riyadh governor.

Prince Salman Ibn Abdel Aziz, reportedly acting on orders from his brother King Fahd, expressed his "dissatisfaction and astonishment" over the creation of the committee for the defence of legitimate rights.

The group, which includes a university professor as well

as a lawyer, was told of the "anger" of the royal family.

He (Prince Salman) argued that by doing what they have done, they violated the norms and offended the political and religious establishments in the Kingdom," Liberty said in a statement received by AFP in Nicosia.

Prince Salman dismissed the group's assertions that their action was in line with Islamic principles and said he would call on the country's religious authorities to "condemn" them.

In its first statement on Friday, the committee called for cooperation with Saudi officials and "every person who seeks to eliminate injustice and support the oppressed."

The statement, also released by Liberty, said one of its objectives was to seek the release of political prisoners detained in Saudi Arabia.

On Sunday, Liberty said the group was set up "after the failure of all attempts to convince the Saudi authorities to release a number of detainees who have been held without trial and without clear reasons."

Formation of the group was accelerated following the arrest of Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Dibyan, a senior religious figure from the Western region of Al-Qassim, who was allegedly detained after criticising a visit former US President George Bush made to Kuwait in April.

Liberty also cited the case of two men, Fahd Al-Zayid and Majid Al-Rashid, who have been detained for two months "simply because their wives organised private Koranic study circles."

Islamic critics of the government have been making

their voices heard since the Gulf War, when Saudi Arabia accepted the deployment of hundreds of thousands of Western troops on its territory.

Two members of the committee, Abdallah Ibn Sultman Al-Masari and Abdallah Ibn Abdelrahman Al-Jabrin, were signatories to a critical political document addressed to King Fahd in July 1992 by 107 Saudi religious figures.

The document, entitled Al-Islah (advice), called for a separation between political and legal bodies in Saudi Arabia, the abolition of "torture and travel bans" as well as a review of laws to ensure they conform with Sharia.

Saudi Arabia, which is home to Islam's holiest shrines, does not have a written constitution. The King rules in accordance with Sharia.

Shevardnadze talks with Yeltsin Friday

TBILISI, Georgia, May 10: Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze said today he would sound out Russian President Boris Yeltsin on the idea of sending UN peacekeepers to police the west Georgian region of Abkhazia, reports Reuter.

Shevardnadze suggested that Ukrainian forces under UN auspices could be sent to the Black Sea province, where hundreds of people have been killed in almost nine months of fighting between Georgian government forces and Abkhazian rebels.

He said on Georgian radio that he would raise the idea during talks with Yeltsin in Moscow on Friday.

"The question will be raised at this meeting of using UN forces to settle the conflict and, in this connection, of sending in Ukrainian forces under UN auspices, he said.

"As soon as favourable conditions are achieved, we will appeal to the leadership of Ukraine."

Security chief fears attempt on Yeltsin

MOSCOW, May 10: An attempt to kill President Boris Yeltsin is increasingly likely, the Russian leader's Security



Boris Yeltsin

Chief, General Mikhail Barsukov, has said, reported ITAR-Tass today, says AFP. "We have information that

the most reactionary political groups have set up guerrilla units," said Barsukov. "We are very much on the look out for terrorists."

Barsukov, who commands the 5,000-strong presidential regiment at the Kremlin, was speaking after the release of a psychiatric report on Major Ivan Kislov, the Russian army deserter who was arrested in January claiming that he planned to kill Yeltsin with a knife.

The report, which has been set to the supreme court said that doctors had found Kislov to be schizophrenic.

Barsukov said that more than 100 terrorist "signals" were recorded last year by monitoring of phone calls, letters and the opposition press.

His service was investigating 45 of these cases.

More than 100 foreigners held in Japan

TOKYO, May 10: More than one hundred foreigners gathered in Tokyo's Yogi Park were arrested Sunday on suspicion of violating immigration law, police said, reports AFP.

Among the 102 foreigners allegedly staying in Japan illegally were 68 from Iran, 11 from Malaysia, 10 from Nepal and nine from Pakistan, police and immigration officials said. They said all the foreigners would be deported to their countries in the near future.

On April 28, Tokyo metropolitan authorities set up barricades around a section of Yogi Park that has become a favourite weekend haunt for thousands of Iranians working in and around the Japanese capital.

The authorities' reason for the barricade — to "protect damaged trees" — was dismissed by much of the media here. Observers saying the real aim was to put an end to the Sunday gatherings in the park, also popular with Japanese Rock and Roll bands.

Off the Record

Diana's stepmother to marry for third time

LONDON: Princess Diana's stepmother Raine Spencer will marry for the third time, it was announced Monday, slightly more than a year after the death of her second husband, Earl Spencer, reports AP.

Countess Spencer is engaged to French businessman Count Jean-Francois de Chamburin, her mother, romantic novelist Dame Barbara Cartland, was quoted as telling British newspapers.

"They rang me last night. They said they were engaged and they were coming to tell me about it today," Dame Barbara told Press Association, the British news agency.

"She said she was frightfully happy and I am delighted she is marrying again, because she has been wandering the world alone. That is not right for a single woman," she said.

Diana's father, the 8th Earl Spencer, died March 29, 1992, after a heart attack.

Wedding plans were not immediately announced.

"I know little more than anyone else," Dame Barbara said. "The only pictures I have seen of him are in today's newspaper. I spoke to him and he sounded very nice."

Diana's father married Raine Legge in 1976, after divorcing her mother. Raine was formerly married to the Earl of Dartmouth.

He wins, collapses, dies

BEIJING: A teenaged youth who smoked non-stop for three hours in an endurance contest in rural China won the competition and immediately collapsed and died, a newspaper reported, says Reuter.

The China commercial news said six teenagers vied in the recent contest in Shanggu county, Henan province.

The youth, identified as Zhu, was declared the winner by the village elders after puffing for three straight hours, the newspaper said.

"Zhu was overjoyed by his success, but suddenly felt dizzy and dropped to the ground dead," it said in its May 9 edition.

The dangers of cigarette smoking have hardly made a ripple in China, where smoking is considered a manly pursuit. At least 65 per cent of the male population smoke.

Sports psychologists counsel unhappy politicians

CANBERRA: Unhappy politicians voted out of office here are seeking psychological help, reports AP.

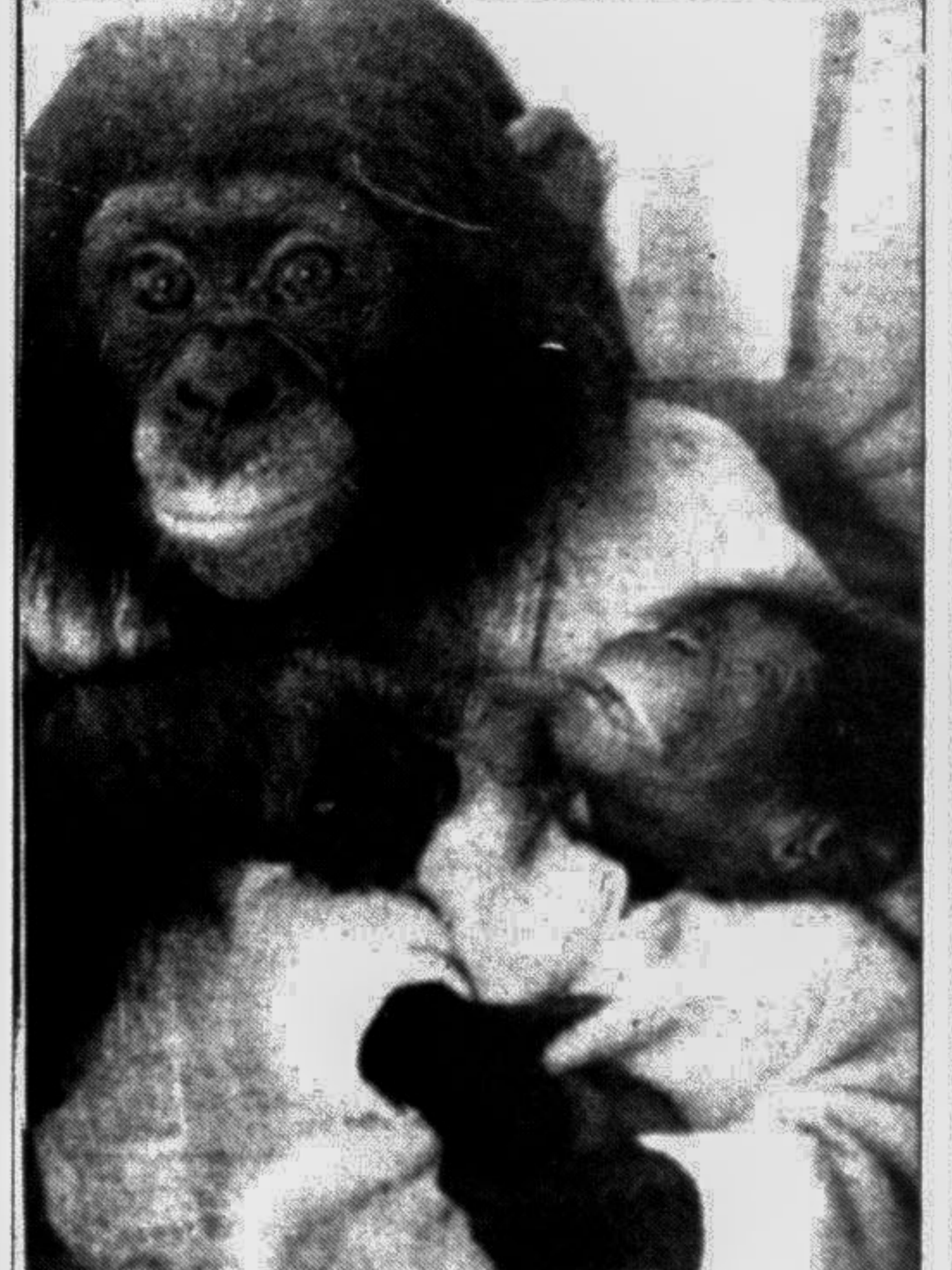
The Association of Former Members of the Parliament of Australia said Monday it has hired a sports psychologist for counselling.

"It is not easy to adjust after the hectic life of long hours, travel and dedication to public duty," said Tony Lamb, secretary of the association.

Sports psychologist Jeffrey Bond said a politician who loses at the polls can suffer as much as a top athlete who loses at the Olympics.

"They're both high achievers," he said. "They're very driven people... it can be quite a blow."

Voters kicked out 17 politicians from the 222-member parliament in a March 13 general election. Another 18 retired before voting started.



FRANCE: Diana (L) holds her two-year-old little brother in her arms Sunday. The baby chimpanzee, born at the Circus Amar, from Julie, a troglodyte pan from Congo, and a pan panyunc bonobo, is a "unique animal in the world", who will get a name from the circus' youngest spectator. —AFP/UNB photo

Kuwait hangs Iraqi for killing guard

KUWAIT, May 10: Kuwait has hanged an Iraqi smuggler for killing a border guard, the Arab Times reported today, says Reuter.

The newspaper said it was the first execution since the 1991 Gulf War ended seven months of Iraqi occupation.

Abdel Hassan Khafi tried to enter Kuwait illegally last year with a 100 boxes of liquor, hand grenades and automatic rifles, the newspaper said. Spotted and chased, he threw a hand grenade at his pursuers killing a 30-year-old Kuwaiti guard.

The death sentence was handed down by the state security court. The Arab Times said Khafi was hanged last week.