

Russian Parliament to challenge Yeltsin's move

MOSCOW, May 14: The Russian Parliament decided today to ask the constitutional court to rule on the legality of President Boris Yeltsin's attempt to bypass the legislature in bringing in a new constitution, reports Reuter.

Itar-Tass news agency said a full session of Parliament endorsed a similar decision by the council of the republic, one of its two chambers, which was taken on Thursday.

Yeltsin issued a decree on Wednesday summoning a special assembly on June 5 to draft a new constitution based on his demands for sweeping Presidential powers.

He invited each of the Russian Federation's 88 re-

gions to send two delegates. Individual deputies would also be represented, but Parliament, which has blocked his every attempt to introduce a new constitution, would not.

Yeltsin has said that such an assembly should be empowered to formally adopt the document.

According to the existing Soviet-era constitution only the Parliament's parent body, the Congress of people's deputies, has the power to pass a new constitution.

The constitutional court is chosen by Congress and its Chairman, Valery Zorkin, has on several occasions sided with Parliament in the power struggle with Yeltsin.

Rao heads for showdown with party dissidents

NEW DELHI, May 14: Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao headed for a showdown with dissidents in his ruling Congress (I) today over his party's refusal to impeach a judge in an historic trial by parliament, reports AFP.

Today's expected confrontation would be the second since March when the dissidents demanded the removal of Rao from the party presidency, a rebellion the premier quickly crushed with the help of close aides.

Party officials said that Rao would address conference of the Congress Parliamentary Party today, the final day of a

three-month budget session to review his party's performance in the federal legislature.

But party MPs, smarting from criticism for not being allowed to vote in favour of an opposition-led impeachment motion against a Supreme Court judge, said the issue would overshadow the party stock-taking.

Three leading dissidents, in a defiant mood since they were suspended from the Congress (I) in March, said they planned to take the party to task for abstaining on Tuesday's vote to impeach Supreme Court Justice V Ramaswami.

"It is quite obvious that indecisiveness and vacillation led to a situation where our MPs, due to no fault of their own, fell between two stools and the party got the worst of all worlds," the dissidents said in a statement.

The dissidents — Kanwar Natwar Singh, Sheila Dixit and KN Singh, all former Congress ministers — said they were ready for a showdown with the party leadership for its "dubious role" on the impeachment motion.

"The Congress (I) stand on the impeachment motion was a political blunder," they

added, referring to the outcry that followed the mass abstention by ruling party MPs.

A total of 196 opposition legislators voted in favour of impeachment, but 205 MPs, mostly from the Congress (I), abstained following a last-minute decision by the party to bail out the judge who was accused of corruption.

Newspapers said Rao, who had initially asked Congress (I) MPs to follow their conscience in the vote, changed his stand under pressure from party colleagues who were reluctant to back an opposition-sponsored motion.

EC threatens to take stern action against Croatia

COPENHAGEN, May 14: The European Community threatened to take "drastic action" against Croatia if it does not act to halt Croatian assaults against Muslims in Bosnia Herzegovina, reports AFP.

Danish Foreign Minister Niels Helveg Petersen, whose country currently holds the EC presidency, warned in a letter to Croatian President Franjo Tudjman that the world would otherwise take action similar to that against Serbia.

The 12 EC countries called for an "immediate halt to acts of aggression and brutality by

Bosnian Croats against the Muslim populations in central and eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina," the letter said.

"The international community plans to take drastic measures against Croatia, as it did in the case of Serbia, if the attacks and violations by the Croats do not stop," said the letter, made public by the Danish Foreign Minister.

The call came after several days of fierce fighting in Bosnia between Bosnian Muslims and Croats, particularly centred on the city of Mostar.

BRIEFLY

CIS leaders meet in Moscow:

Leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) meet in Moscow Friday to consider a closer form of economic coexistence, along the lines of a plan proposed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin in March, reports Reuter from Moscow.

But CIS officials suggested that the most pressing reason for the summit, unexpectedly moved forward by two weeks, was to give Yeltsin public backing from his neighbours before a new round of his internal political battle.

Yeltsin, boosted by an April referendum which gave a vote of confidence in his Presidency and radical economic reforms, has since moved to limit the powers of Russia's conservative Parliament and politicians hostile to his policies.

Fire breaks out in Myanmar:

A major fire swept through the main downtown area of the central Myanmar town of Myingyan, state-run radio Yangon reported Thursday, says AFP from Bangkok.

The radio did not mention casualties, but said the blaze lasted for several hours and destroyed more than 2,000 buildings including private houses, schools and a movie theatre.

The fire started late Wednesday in a private house in Myingyan town, about 500 kilometers (310 miles) north of Yangon capital, it said in a report monitored here.

4 army chiefs resign in Surinam:

Surinam's four top army chiefs bowed to government pressure and resigned Thursday, the Netherlands press agency ANP reported, says AFP from the Hague.

Commanders Ivan Graaonogt, Badresein Sital, Chas Mijnaal and Etienne Boerenveen announced their decision at a meeting of officers and non-commissioned officers, ANP said, citing unnamed sources.

The collective resignations apparently ended a tense showdown between the military and President Ronald Venetiaan's civilian government in the former Dutch colony in South America.

Surinam's national assembly demanded the four resign Wednesday. Earlier in the week, the assembly approved Arthy Gorre as Commander in Chief of the armed forces over protests from some elements of the military.

Three European diplomats freed:

Afghan kidnappers released "unconditionally" three European diplomats late Thursday from three weeks in detention in a border township, officials said, reports AFP from Quetta.

The diplomats were handed over to Pakistani authorities at Chaman of the Pakistan side of the border, they said.

Jack Dodds of Britain, Stephen Elbert of Germany and Gert Piening of the Netherlands were kidnapped April 23 after entering Afghanistan for an unexplained trip.

Their Pakistani companion, Sardar Saadat Ali Hazara, was also freed.

13 die in Beijing floods:

Heavy rains in southern China's Hunan province triggered floods which killed 13 people, the Guangming daily said yesterday, reports Reuter from Beijing.

The flooding in early May caused 1,000 houses to collapse and ruined 22,444 hectares (55,450 acres) of cropland, it said.

Every spring and summer, floods in China's southern and eastern provinces ravage large areas and lead to heavy loss of life and property.

Peres to visit India, China

JERUSALEM, May 14: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres leaves Sunday on a visit to India and China, both of which established diplomatic relations with the Jewish state in January 1992, reports AP.

It will be the first official visit by an Israeli foreign minister to India.

Peres' predecessor, David Levy, was in Beijing 16 months ago to sign the protocol establishing diplomatic ties between the two nations.

India, a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement and a strong supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organization, had with held recognition of Israel since its founding in 1948, insisting that Israel resolve its conflict with the Arabs.

India agreed to diplomatic relations to join in multilateral talks tied to the US-backed Middle East peace process.

In a news conference earlier this week, Peres said he hoped his visit to New Delhi would mark "a new chapter in relations between India and Israel."

He said he expected to sign several cooperation agreements on culture and tourism and would offer Israel's help in agricultural projects.

"Here, no matter that India is so large and great and Israel is so small, we can cooperate to a very great extent," he said.

Clinton planning to send troops to Bosnia

WASHINGTON, May 14: Despite deep reservations, President Clinton says he is now considering sending US troops to join international forces protecting civilian enclaves in Bosnia, reports AP.

In an extensive interview published Friday in The Washington Post, the president said European opposition to his proposed military strategy has also forced him to reconsider other options that the White House had discarded, including the use of air strikes alone against Bosnian Serb positions.

"I think to whatever extent we can achieve a genuine consensus we should," Clinton told the Post. "We have a lot of other issues at stake with the Europeans... and the way we handle this and the way it resonates will affect all that."

Clinton said Secretary of State Warren Christopher's recent efforts to sell the US plan to European leaders had resulted only in an agreement to consider arming the Bosnian Muslim forces and make limited air strikes on the Serbs — if other "less extreme" options fail.

On the fighting in the former Yugoslavia, Clinton expressed reservations about a French request that the United States send ground troops as part of a UN force that would protect six civilian enclaves in Bosnia.

"I'm not there yet," Clinton said in the interview, because he believes the plan would not lead to an overall political settlement. But he added, "The idea of stopping ethnic cleansing and stopping the violence is, to me, the most compelling argument for the safe havens."

ME peace talks end without reaching agreement

WASHINGTON, May 14: Arabs and Israelis ended the ninth round of Middle East peace talks Thursday as far apart as ever but committed to trying again, reports AFP.

"I regret to say that we finish this round without agreement," said Palestinian delegation chief Haidar Abdel Shafi. "We continued to talk with the Israelis about a joint declaration of principles. We could not reach an agreement."

Shafi said that the Palestinians had returned a US initiative aimed at bridging the Gulf between the two sides to the Americans and Israelis with comments. If Israel supports their observations, he

US to talk with DPRK on withdrawal from NPT

WASHINGTON, May 14: The United States is ready to discuss with North Korea its withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, but no date has been set, said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher Thursday, reports AFP.

"We are willing to meet with North Korea to help resolve the current situation, but no meeting has been scheduled," said Boucher during a press conference.

Our goal remains to work in concert with the international community, said Boucher, noting that the UN Security Council adopted a resolution on Tuesday calling on North Korea to rescind its decision to pull out of the treaty.

"The passage of the resolution conforms the international community's great concern about these matters and its dedication to making every effort to convince North Korea to reaffirm its commitment to the non-proliferation treaty and to live up to its non-proliferation obligations," said Boucher.

North Korea, which is to leave the treaty on June 12, rejected the UN resolution and called it a farce.

But Assistant Secretary for Military and Political Affairs Robert Gallucci said on Wednesday he had received indications that North Korea wanted to resolve the dispute.

Accord to help repatriate Afghan refugees

NICOSIA, May 14: Iran, Afghanistan and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees have agreed to help 700,000 refugees who fled to Iran during the Afghan civil war return home by the end of the year, reports Reuter.

The official Iranian news agency (IRNA) said delegations from the two countries met a UNHCR team in Tehran on Thursday and agreed to set up bases in Afghanistan to help ease the return.

IRNA quoted the leader of the Iranian delegation Ahmad Hussein as saying 518,000 of an estimated three million

Five killed as wall collapses in Manila

MANILA, May 14: A huge wall remaining from a burned building collapsed Friday on a row of shanties in downtown Manila, killing five people and wounding at least 28 others, reports AP.

At least seven of the injured were in critical condition, hospital authorities said.

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A Bosnian army police woman (L) asks a Muslim woman for her documents in Sarajevo Thursday. The besieged Bosnian capital has been relatively quiet during the last 4 days. —AFP/UNB photo

Moscow urges Azerbaijan to free soldiers

MOSCOW, May 14: Moscow asked Azerbaijan on Thursday to hand over five Russian soldiers, sentenced to death this week for illegally fighting alongside its Armenian foes Itar-Tass news agency said, reports Reuter.

The five Russian army privates, who had been based in Armenia, were convicted of taking part in raids on Azeri territory last June in which about 30 soldiers were killed and three Azeri tanks and armoured vehicles were destroyed.

A sixth man was given 15 years in jail.



The stars of Andre Techine's film "Ma Saison Preferee" (My favourite season) Catherine Deneuve (C), her daughter Chiara Matrianni (L) and Daniel Auteu (R) pose for the photographers at the film's presentation at the 46th Cannes Film Festival. —AFP/UNB photo

Russia rejects CIS proposal to put Soviet N-arms under joint control

MOSCOW, May 14: Russia on Thursday rejected proposals by fellow members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to put former Soviet nuclear forces under joint command and set up joint armed forces, reports Reuter.

Itar-Tass news agency said the Russian delegation at a meeting of Defence Ministers of the six commonwealth signatories of a collective security treaty insisted it should have full control over the nuclear arsenal of the former superpower.

"Nuclear arms should belong to a particular state," Tass quoted Russian Deputy Defence Minister Boris Gromov as saying.

"Russia is internationally recognised as the successor of the Soviet Union in this sphere and it has sole rights," he said.

He said Russia refused to endorse the draft agreement, supported by the remaining five countries — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

It stipulated that nuclear arms should be kept under joint commonwealth control.

Most Soviet nuclear warheads are on Russian soil. Others are in Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Last year, these three signed a protocol committing themselves to get rid of all nuclear arms. They acknowledged Russia as the sole nuclear successor to the Soviet

Union.

Later Belarus agreed to put its missiles under Moscow's control, while Kazakhstan favours keeping the nuclear arms remaining under joint commonwealth command.

Ukraine wants more control over the nuclear missiles on its territory as long as they are deployed there. It seeks compensation and western security guarantees before it gives the missiles away.

Russia remained alone in rejecting a draft agreement, proposed by other five collective security treaty member states, which provided for the creation of joint CIS armed forces.

Earlier Russia has signalled it would favour maintaining

some sort of integrated NATO-style military structure.

Gromov said Russia opposes the creation of full-scale armed forces in peacetime, mainly for financial reasons.

"Russia favours the creation of joint armed forces, but only in wartime," Gromov said. "But it cannot afford to run such forces in peacetime."

Tass said both draft documents, due to have been discussed at a summit of the 10-member commonwealth on Friday, had been withdrawn from its agenda.

The agency said commonwealth military commander Yevgeny Shaposhnikov was expected to report on the differences to the heads of states.

Off the Record

He is the first to climb Everest without oxygen

LONDON: Briton Harry Taylor, the first mountaineer to reach the summit of Mount Everest from the Nepalese side without oxygen, said on Thursday he was so exhausted that all he wanted was to go home, reports Reuter.

"Quite honestly I was so dog-tired and all I did was sit down and take a picture and I just wanted to go home," he said in his first interview as he waited to be airlifted for Camp Two on the 29,233 foot (8,946 metre) peak.

Taylor, 33, said in the radio interview recorded in London that climbing without oxygen had been like having a plastic bag on his head. "You also feel very, very old," he added.

Pangs of separation so unbearable?

RYDE, England: A magician's wife, irritated at his frequent absences abroad, cooked and served him his long-time associate and stage prop—his rabbit, reports Reuter.

Chris Cox said Friday that his 29-year-old wife and former assistant Christine had killed Roger the rabbit and served him for dinner at their home in Ryde, southern England.

The Times newspaper reported that Mrs Cox said she killed the rabbit accidentally when she kicked over a pile of the husband's stage props in a fit of rage at his absence.

An accomplished cook, she skinned and cooked the rabbit in a marinade of prunes, stewed tea, bacon dripping and red wine.

Matchmaking tours

TOKYO: Bachelors in rural Japan having trouble finding a partner may soon get a chance to choose a Russian bride, reports Reuter.

Japan Tour Systems (JTS) in Amori, northern Japan, hopes to organise matchmaking tours for local farmers and businessmen to Sakhalin Island and the Khabarovsk Region in the Russian Far East.

"Finding a bride has become a big problem in our region and the Russian Far East is very near," JTS spokesman Hiroshi Sato said on Friday.

"We believe that Russian women living in the Far East would adapt easily to the climate and conditions here, which are similar to those they already know," Sato said.

In recent years, as Japanese rural women have increasingly moved into the cities in search of work, many farmers have taken Thai Chinese, Filipino and other Asian brides.

Pretty women causing a stir in Mexico

MEXICO CITY: Beauty pageants are hardly alien to Mexico, where virtually every pueblo crowns a beauty queen sometime during the year. But this year, the Miss Universe pageant, with all its glitter, has come to Mexico City, and the show has become a crowd-stopper, reports AP.

Everywhere the women go, they leave capital resident talking. Many praise the contest, but others fear it promotes women as sex objects among Mexico's legendary machos.

Pastel pink and green buses have been darting around Mexico City for days and were spotted again Thursday bearing contestants to a photo shoot at a luxury hotel.

The Miss Universe pageant is the biggest beauty contest of them all, a competition for a crown, scholarship and prizes that has attracted more than 85 national beauty queens. The finals will be broadcast May 21 to hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide.

The contest is about bathing suit competitions, talent competitions and fashion competitions featuring national costumes and evening gowns.

And it's something Mexicans can very well relate to.

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Shafi said that the Palestinians had returned a US initiative aimed at bridging the Gulf between the two sides to the Americans and Israelis with comments. If Israel supports their observations, he

said, "an agreement would always be possible."

The Americans called on Israelis and Palestinians to at least make a joint declaration of principles before breaking up. Those principles could serve as the basis for discussion at the next round of talks scheduled for June. The first round was held a year and a half ago.

Israeli delegation chief Elyakim Rubinstein sounded more upbeat than Shafi, saying that the Palestinians were still talking separately with State Department officials and that it was too early to say that nothing would come of the US initiative.

"We would have liked to have achieved more, but we should not be pessimistic," Rubinstein said. "That's the message we send to the Israeli people and those living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip."

In keeping with their role as "a full partner" in the negotiations, the Americans submitted first to the Israelis and then to the Palestinians a new document that Washington billed as a final attempt to bring the sides closer together.

The document was presented by two senior State Department officials, Daniel Kurzer and Afion Miller. It was preceded by a message from

Secretary of State Warren Christopher to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin through the US Ambassador in Tel Aviv William Brown.

Rubinstein earlier declined to disclose the contents of the US proposal, saying only that it "deals with serious issues that require reflection."

The Israelis spent the night studying the US proposal and reporting to Israeli leaders in Jerusalem.

Shafi said that the Palestinians would draw the necessary conclusion from the just-concluded talks and from the preceding sessions. "We are still in favour of having more talks," he added.

The Palestinians did not attend the meeting Wednesday evening at the State Department between the Americans and the Israelis.

Syrian delegation chief Mouaffaq Allaf also said there had been no progress in his talks with the Israelis.

"The discussions were serious, but we don't come to have serious discussions. We come to have positive results," he said.

The third sector of the peace talks, between Israel and the Lebanon, also led to little progress, remaining deadlocked over the Israeli army's occupation of a band of land in southern Lebanon as a security buffer.

BJP man demands new wage board for journalists

NEW DELHI, May 14: The BJP member, JP Mathur, today demanded in the Rajya Sabha that a new wage board should be constituted immediately by the government for journalists and non-journalists, reports PTI.

Raising the matter during zero hour, the member said the new wage board had become necessary because the earnings of the newspapers had gone up by two to three times since the Bachawat Wage Board was set up, but the wages of the journalists and non-journalists had remained stagnant.