

BRIEFLY

8 Hacked to death in Philippines:

Muslim bandits hacked to death eight members of a Christian group in the southern Philippines, police said Monday, reports AP from Philippines.

Regional police spokesman Superintendent Ernanto Baul said the bandits kidnaped their victims Thursday as they prayed at a house in the village of Luti in Zamboanga del Sur province, 800 kilometers (500 miles), south of Manila.

It was not known whether the killings were religiously motivated. Baul said the bandits, led by Awalon Kamlon, had been responsible for several kidnappings and robberies.

Abductions, extra-judicial killings and thefts are rampant in the southern Philippines where several armed groups, including Communist rebels, Muslim secessionists, private armies and military-sponsored Christian cult groups, operate.

Poisonous mushrooms kill 11:

Eleven people have died in Iran's western Kermanshah Province in the past week after eating poisonous mushrooms, the Iranian news agency Irna said on Sunday, reports Reuter from Nicosia.

Dozens of other people were taken to hospital after eating mushrooms, the agency said. Kermanshah inhabitants gather mushrooms every year despite the poison risk, it added.

Plane hijack bid, one Briton held:

A 17-year-old Briton was arrested on Sunday after trying to hijack a plane bound for the southern Spanish city of Malaga, police said, reports Reuter from Spain.

The captain decided to ignore the teenager's claim he was carrying a bomb and the plane, which took off from Newcastle in northern England, landed without incident.

The would-be hijacker, whose name was not released, said she wanted to fly on to Lebanon to free relatives in jail there.

It was not immediately known to which airline the plane belonged.

Gen Colin Powell in London:

Gen Colin Powell, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, arrived in London on Sunday for talks with British and US officials before going to NATO meetings in Brussels, reports AP from London.

Powell will meet with Defence Secretary Malcolm Rifkind, among others, on Monday before flying to Belgium for the regular spring meeting of NATO's Defence Planning and Nuclear Planning organization.

The general made no statement when he flew into Heathrow Airport aboard a US Air Force Boeing 707 jet from Washington.

4 Israelis killed by mistake:

Israeli soldiers shot dead four of their own colleagues in an accident in Lebanon early Monday military sources said, reports Reuter from Israel.

Three soldiers were also wounded in the incident near Qantara in Israel's self-declared border "security zone" set up in 1985 to prevent guerrilla attacks on northern Israel.

Details were not immediately available. According to sources in Lebanon, about 1,000 Israeli troops patrol the zone along with some 3,000 Israeli backed militiamen in the south Lebanon army.

US still hostile to Iran : Rafsanjani

TEHRAN, May 24: Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani on Sunday criticized the United States' "hostile attitude" towards his country and said ties could only improve if Washington released frozen Iranian assets, reports AFP.

Rafsanjani also dismissed as "incorrect" foreign press reports that Iran could be willing to adopt a moderate stance against British author Salman Rushdie who faces an Iranian death sentence.

"We have serious disputes with the United States. They still have a hostile attitude towards us," Rafsanjani was quoted as saying by the Iranian news agency Irna.

Iran would "make up its mind" about re-establishing ties with Washington if it released Iranian assets frozen in the United States, he said.

Millions of dollars in Iranian assets have been held in the United States since 1979, when Iranian students occupied the US embassy in Tehran and held US nationals hostage.

Iran and the United States have not had diplomatic ties since 1980, one year after the Islamic revolution which toppled the Shah.

Rafsanjani said Iran was interested in having relations with all but two countries, which he did not name, but Irna said he was referring to South Africa and Israel.

ANC plotted to snatch Mandela from prison

JOHANNESBURG, May 24: Nine years before Nelson Mandela's release from prison, the ANC planned to snatch him from the prison courtyard with a helicopter and fly him to asylum at a foreign embassy, reports AP.

The plan was never carried out, apparently because high-ranking African National Congress officials feared from Mandela's life, said Eddie Daniels, a former political prisoner who drew up the plan.

Daniels' account was published in several local newspapers Sunday, and Mandela confirmed the reports of the escape plot Sunday afternoon to the South African Press Association. He refused to comment in depth, saying he had not seen the news reports.

Documents outlining the plot are to go on exhibit at a museum in Cape Town this week.

The escape was planned for New Year's Day in 1981, when Mandela was serving a life sentence for sabotage against the government at Robben Island prison, Daniels, who served 15 years on the island penitentiary for anti-apartheid activities, said he drafted the plan, with Mandela's knowledge, while there.

According to Daniels, the plan would have taken advantage of relatively lax security during the holiday season.

Croat troops evicting 200 Muslims a day

MOSTAR, Bosnia, May 24: Bosnian Croat troops are evicting up to 200 Muslims a day in Mostar in a campaign to purge the city of some 10,000 refugees who arrived over the past year UN officials said on Sunday, reports Reuter.

Pitched battles between Croats and Muslims in Mostar this month abated under a tenuous ceasefire accord late last week. But small arms fire still crackles along the front lines, which skirt the Neretva river through the city centre.

UN officials said between 100 and 200 Muslims forced from their homes in Croat-controlled parts of Mostar daily

Allied plan a face-saving gesture, say Sarajevans

SARAJEVO (Bosnia-Herzegovina), May 24: The Washington formula for ending the killing in Bosnia-Herzegovina has left Sarajevans confused and demoralized, and offers little hope it will succeed, reports AP.

The plan, announced Saturday by US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, calls for the formation of safe havens to protect Bosnian Muslims and the deployment of monitors along Bosnia's border with Serbia.

It also calls for humanitarian aid to be allowed to reach those in need, continuation of UN sanctions of Yugoslavia until Bosnian Serb troops withdraw from territories occupied by force, and maintenance of the "no-fly" zone intended to keep Serb planes away from Bosnia.

Many aspects of the plan already have been attempted on a small scale, but have done little to end the carnage. And without the threat of force, there is little reason for the Bosnian Serbs to budge.

On Sunday, Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic rejected the formula as "absolutely unacceptable" and urged implementation of the Vance-Owen plan proposed earlier, which the Bosnia Serbs have rejected.

That plan would divide Bosnia into 10 provinces, largely along ethnic lines.

Many Sarajevans suspect the latest formula is simply a face-saving gesture by major countries which lack the resolve to confront the Bosnian Serbs militarily.

They fear the plan would place Muslims in ethnic ghettos, and say it holds no guarantee that hundreds of thousands of displaced Muslims, Croats and Serbs would be able to return to their homes.

"Now we have to be forced to agree to some kind of ghettos, and it is perfectly clear this can never bring peace," Zaim Zeljkovic, a deputy brigade commander, told The Associated Press. "A majority of us joined the army to avoid exactly that."

Izetbegovic and most Bosnian Muslims have sought military intervention to push back the Serbs or at least the lifting of the UN arms embargo so government forces can obtain weapons and fight on equal terms.

Bosnian government troops defending Sarajevo are so short of ammunition that many front-line soldiers are issued only 12 bullets a day.

Many aspects of the Washington plan have already been tried by the United Nations. The eastern Muslim enclave of Srebrenica was de-

clared a "safe area" under UN protection last month after weeks of bloody artillery attacks.

The heavy shelling has ceased, but UN monitors record scores of cease-fire violations daily on the front lines at the edge of the city.

Talks on declaring Sarajevo a "safe zone" have been bogged down for weeks. Bosnian officials fear the plan would lead to an exodus from the city, thereby accomplishing the Bosnian Serb goal of driving non-Serbs from the city. The Bosnian Serbs insist that government forces in Sarajevo surrender their weapons.

Western war jets have been flying over Bosnia daily since the no-fly ban went into effect. But since Bosnian Serbs never relied on air power, many Bosnian officials consider it a meaningless gesture.



Hundreds of health workers and activists join government officials and members of the gay community in Manila in a candle-lit rally Sunday to remember those killed by AIDS epidemic. — AFP/UNB photo

Sihanouk urges Khmer Rouge to end violence, save Cambodia

PHNOM PENH, May 24: National reconciliation leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk on Monday, appealed to Khmer Rouge guerrillas to end their violence and help "save Cambodia" through the UN-organised elections, reports AP.

Sihanouk spoke at a huge public rally on the second day of elections aimed at ending two decades of war and bloody revolution that killed perhaps 2 million people.

Nearly shelling shut some polling stations in the countryside Tuesday morning, but no major election-related violence was reported. It was not clear if the shells were aimed at the stations or resulted from the frequent government-Khmer Rouge skirmishes.

Some Khmer Rouge guerrillas had earlier threatened people with death if they voted, and on Monday they launched minor attacks on a few polling stations.

But Cambodians braved nearby shelling, waited hours outside polling stations in monsoon rains, and pushed their way inside to cast ballots. On Monday a third of the country's 4.7 million registered voters voted in mostly peaceful conditions.

On Tuesday, the still-steady stream of voters in Phnom Penh included many who had been too afraid to vote the first day.

"I listened to the radio but nothing happened in the city," Van Nak, a 35-year-old tobacco seller, said in explaining why he voted Tuesday.

The election — Cambodia's first multiparty polls in 21 years — ends Friday.

In front of the Royal Palace, Sihanouk spoke before thousands including a long procession of Buddhist monks and

nuns whose hands were folded in prayer. Two days earlier, they had completed an 18-day cross-country "peace walk" during which some were injured in crossfire.

His eyes imploring, Sihanouk urged the Khmer Rouge to follow the Buddhist precept of reconciliation.

"I beg them to... accept, all of us in Cambodia, once and for all an end to the violence," he said. "And we should not find or create false pretenses to say or to justify that we cannot achieve reconciliation."

If the guerrillas continue violence, he said, "What would be the use of the elections? The elections must... not just implement democracy, but save Cambodia."

Sihanouk, who had ruled the country for three peaceful decades, is widely revered by citizens and is the only leader accepted by all factions including the Khmer Rouge. He returned home Saturday from five weeks abroad to support the elections.

Sihanouk is expected to talk with the Khmer Rouge after the election.



PHNOM PENH: Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk, 70, speaks at a peace rally outside the Royal Palace Monday on the second day of the UN organised general elections. — AFP/UNB photo

Veerappan's men ambush police vehicles, kill 6 in Mysore

BANGALORE (India), May 24: Six policemen were killed today and two injured in an ambush by India's most notorious outlaw, police said, reports AFP.

A police sub-inspector and five constables died when members of the gang belonging to the bandit Veerappan set off a powerful landmine and opened fire on their two vehicles, a police spokesman here said.

A superintendent of police, Gopal Hosur, and his driver were injured in the ambush at Kollegal in Mysore district, some 200 kms (120 miles) south of here, he said.

Veerappan, 43, is India's most wanted outlaw and has been described by the authorities as a menace to humans, wildlife and the environment.

Uttar Pradesh governor sacked

LUCKNOW (India), May 24: India's federal government on Sunday removed the governor of a key northern state where Hindu fanatics demolished a mosque last December, reports Reuter.

Nearly 2,000 people were killed in religious riots which followed the demolition.

B Satyanarain Reddy was replaced by Moti Lal Vohra as Governor of Uttar Pradesh state, President Shankar Dayal Sharma's office announced.

Congress leaders of Uttar Pradesh have been demanding Reddy's removal since the razing of the mosque.

They suspect him of loyalty to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government which was ruling in the state at that time.

Congressmen say that Reddy failed to correctly advise Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao in the days leading up to the demolition.

Eritrea proclaims independence

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia, May 24: Eritrea, the northernmost province of Ethiopia, on Monday formally declared itself the world's newest nation, reports AP.

The country's new red, blue and green flag with a yellow olive branch was raised during a midnight ceremony Sunday in the capital Asmara.

President Isaias Aferwerki, the key leader in a 30-year war of independence, called it a moment of joy and resurrection for Eritrea.

He appealed to the international community for help to rebuild his young state.

Criminal suits against 2 ex-presidents

3 ROK Gens fired for role in 1979 coup

SEOUL, May 24: In a surprise rebuke to the military, President Kim Young-sam on Monday fired the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff for his role in a 1979 coup and replaced him with a non-army officer, reports AP.

The presidential office said Gen Lee Pill-sup was fired along with two other senior generals involved in the coup that put into power two former presidents, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo.

"The action is to close the chapter of military intervention in politics that has stained our constitutional history," chief presidential spokesman Lee Kyung-jae said.

The action followed Kim's remarks two weeks ago that the 1979 army revolt was tantamount to a military coup. Monday's action was seen as a reminder to the military to stay out of politics and an attempt to restore public confidence in the army.

Five criminal suits have been filed against the two former presidents for insubordination and disobedience by staging the coup. Hundreds of students have staged protests demanding the former presidents be punished.

In 1979, Chun, then an army major general, arrested the army chief of staff and several other generals to seize power after his mentor, President Park Chung-hee, was assassinated.

Roh, also an army major general, mobilised his front-line units to help Chun consolidate power in the chaotic days that followed Park's death. Roh succeeded Chun as president in 1988.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen Lee Yang-ho was named the new chairman of the joint chiefs of staff and becomes the first non-army officer to fill the post.

The presidential office said low-ranking army officers involved in the coup would also be sacked or reprimanded.

Off the Record

Their afternoon stroll stops traffic

WASHINGTON: Any other father and daughter taking a walk on Sunday would have gone largely unnoticed, but President Bill Clinton and Daughter Chelsea stopped traffic and some tourists during a rare afternoon stroll, reports Reuter.

Tourists and motorists were surprised to see the President and his daughter walking hand-in-hand to a local book store some three blocks away from the White House.

Clinton, whose image as a man of the people was tarnished by news of his 200 dollar haircut aboard Air Force One, at Los Angeles airport last week, shook some hands and nodded hello to awed tourists.

The president and his daughter passed over a book about First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton on display in the window and another on Chelsea's cat, Socks.

Instead, the President bought the latest book by Scott Turow titled "Pleading Guilty", while 13-year-old Chelsea settled on five science fiction books.



Gold necklace saved her life

TORRANCE (Calif): A woman's gold necklace apparently saved her life by stopping a stray bullet fired in a nearby gang fight, reports AP.

Rafaela Ramos suffered only a minor wound from the .22-caliber slug found embedded in her necklace, said police Lt Jim Herren. The bullet probably would have gone through her neck and killed her if the choker-type necklace hadn't stopped it.

"She was saved because the wide, gold necklace she was wearing stopped the bullet from complete penetration", Herren said.

Ramos, 33, was standing with friends a short distance from where a traffic dispute led to a shootout Saturday night between two rival gangs, Herren said. Martin Gonzales, another bystander, was hit in the knee and shoulder by gunfire. Gonzales, 32, was treated at a hospital and released.

The gunman fled along with two other men. No arrests were made, Herren said.

Sextuplets born in Argentina

BUENOS AIRES (Argentina): For the first time in Argentina, sextuplets have been born, to a 28-year-old woman who had undergone a fertility treatment, reports AP.

The father, Sergio Lopez, 34, a clothes salesman, told journalists Sunday that his wife, Silvana Lungano, a school teacher, gave birth to four girls and two boys through a successful caesarean-section operation. The children were in incubators and doctors believed they could survive.

Lopez said that the newborns were named Camila, Solana, Mara Luz, Julieta, Alejo and Lautaro.

Dr Ramiro Quintana of the Guemes Clinic reported that the babies were 14 weeks premature and that they weighed 480-820 grams (16-28 oz). "They are in stable yet delicate condition", he told reporters.

9-month-old baby kidnapped during car theft

CORONA (Calif): A 9-month-old baby was kidnapped when a man stole a young couple's car, police said, reports AP.

The tearful parents, Raul and Melissa Cortez, made a televised appeal Sunday for the return of their daughter.

"Just bring back my baby, that's all I need. You can have everything else", a sobbing Mrs Cortez said.

Cortez asked the thief to drop his baby off safely and contact police. "We won't press charges", he promised before he broke down crying.

The child, named Caitlin, was in the back seat of a 1986 Ford van on Sunday when a man drove off with her, said officer Kurt Winger. The Cortezes left the engine running when they stopped to look at a rental house.

Suspense grips Pakistan ahead of SC verdict on Sharif's dismissal

ISLAMABAD, May 24: A nerve-tacking suspense has gripped Pakistan ahead of a Supreme Court verdict this week on a petition challenging dismissal of Nawaz Sharif's government by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, reports AFP.

Eleven judges of the country's highest judicial forum have been hearing the crucial case for the past two weeks, casting a pall over all political activity in the country.

Less than a week after the April 18 dissolution of the National Assembly and his own sacking by Ishaq Khan, Sharif challenged the presidential order as "illegal, unconstitutional and mala fide."

His dismissal had capped a bitter three-month-long tussle between the President, a 78-year-old seasoned bureaucrat, and Sharif, a 43-year-old industrialist-turned politician over Sharif's efforts to clip the President's discretionary powers.

It was those powers, which he had used in 1990 to fire Pakistan's first woman Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, that Ishaq Khan used again to fire Sharif, while promising new elections for July 14.

The election schedule must be announced by May 29 to fulfil a 45-day constitutional requirement, and observers expect the court decision in a couple of days.

Both Nawaz Sharif's camp and the caretaker government of Balakh Sher Mazari installed by Ishaq Khan have started discussing possible post-verdict scenarios while the Defense Ministry said Sunday all was ready for elections.

Sources in the 62-member multi-party, pro-president caretaker government believe events can not be rolled back, citing the turbulent lead up to the firing, the split in Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and a revolt in his cabinet.

While pinning hopes on the polls going ahead as programmed, a behind-the-scenes move was also on to bring a vote of no-confidence against Sharif should the assembly be restored.

"This will be another conspiracy," Sharif has warned saying that the masses had already "rejected" the presidential action, and the deposed premier's camp appeared optimistic that his case was strong and the court competent to give a positive verdict.

During the proceedings, the court observed that it would hand down a judgement which would satisfy the nation and the conscience of the judges.

Urging the State Attorney to submit "weighty grounds" to justify the dissolution, Chief Justice Nasim Hassan Shah Sunday remarked that the time had come to give constitutional provision a chance to

decide the petition.

Though there has been no hint of the verdict, Sharif has already started contacting former MPs, assuring them that he was opposed to policy of "vengeance."

His party claims that despite desertions Sharif had been assured support by a comfortable majority in the assembly.

But analysts here saw little chance of the deposed premier and the president being able to work together with such a legacy of bitterness, and doubt whether he could function easily with four openly-hostile provincial governments.

His nominated chief ministers have all been replaced in in-house changes since April 18.

Speaker of the defunct assembly Gohar Ayub Khan observed that the president would have "no justification" to stay in power if Sharif's government were restored.

Newspapers meanwhile have speculated that instead of resigning or reconciling with Sharif, the president might clamp a state of emergency, effectively hampering basic rights and the authority of the judiciary.

Sharif has said he is ready for elections, that would pit him once again against Bhutto, if the court upholds the presidential order.

Israeli choppers destroy 2 houses in Lebanon

SIDON (Lebanon), May 24: Israeli gunships demolished the houses of two Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim activists with guided missiles Monday in south Lebanon, police said, reports AP.

No casualties were reported after two Cobra helicopters stage the daybreak attack on the homes of two villagers in Qabrikha. The helicopters also strafed suspected guerrilla trails along the Litani River, according to police.

Qabrikha faces the central sector of Israel's self-styled "security zone," an enclave captured in 1985 to shield northern Israel against cross-border guerrilla attacks.