ABDIFFE Y

Explosion kills 6 in Florence:

huge explosion believed triggered by leaking natural gas collapsed and ripped apart buildings in the historic centre of Florence early Thursday, killing at least six people and injuring about 30, the Italian news agency ANSA reported, says AP from Florence.

Rescue teams working under special lights dug into the debris, searching for an undetermined number of people feared buried. The blast, just after 1 am (1100 GMT), was heard throughout the city.

The blast shattered the windows of the famed Uffici Gallery and apartments in the centre of Florence. Officials also were trying to assess the damage to major works of art at the Uffici.

Rescue teams found the first victims of the blast, two children, shortly after 4 am (0200 GMT), ANSA said. The bodies of four other people were dug out of the rubble shortly after 5 am(0300 GMT), it added

Floods hit Afghanistan: Flash floods have washed away some 400 houses and four mosques in a district of the northern Alghan province of Badakhshan, the official Kabul radio said on Wednesday, reports Reuter from Islamabad.

The broadcast, monitored in Islamabad, said the floods caused by rains also uprooted some 50,000 trees in the district of Darwaz.

Ship Sinks in Andaman Sea, 17 die: A ship carrying more than 300 people sank in the Andaman Sea, leaving 17 dead and 120 missing, a government-owned newspaper reported Thursday, AP reports from Yangon.

The newspaper New Light of Myanmar said 180 people had been rescued from the Aung Yadana Myint after it sprang a leak and sank Sunday night while anchored at Hintha Island, near the Tenasserim coast

The ship was traveling from Moulmein, capital of Mon state, 160 kilometers (100 miles) east of Yangon, to Kawthaung, the country's southern most town, about 725 kilometers (450 miles) farther south.

The newspaper said it was the worst coastal shipping accident in Myanmar history.

Clash at gold mine takes 7 lives: Seven people died and 60 were injured in fighting between workers at a gold mine southwest of Johannesburg, a mine company spokesman said Wednesday, reports AP from Johannesburg.

Six of the injured were in critical condition from the clashes at Hartebeessontein gold mine that occurred Tuesday night, said Arno Steyn of Angolavaal, which operates the mine 180 kilometers (120 miles) from Johannesburg.

"By this morning it was back to normal. People reported back to work and things were under control," he said. The fighting occurred in one workers' hostel at the mine,

and the cause was not yet known, Steyn said.

Turkish troops kill 11 Kurds: Turkish security forces killed 11 Kurdish rebels Wednesday during a search operation for the guerillas who staged a bloody bus ambush Annatolian news agency said, reports Reuter from Bingol

Twenty one Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) rebels have now been killed in clashes since troops began hunting for the ambushers in the rugged terrain of southeast Turkey.

"Military operations are continuing in the mountains in three provinces despite adverse weather," Unal Erkan, regional emergency rule Governor, told reporters in the town of

Israel to free 280 Palestinians: Israel will release about 280 Palestinian detainees as a

goodwill gesture for the Muslim Holiday of Eid-ul-Azha next week, Israeli Desence Ministry officials said on Wednesday, Reuter from Jerusalem says. The prisoners due to be freed were all minors, ill, elderly

or women and some were about to complete their sentences, the officials said.

The committee which approved the releases tried to exclude detainees who had been involved in actions which resulted in casualties, they added.

unjustifiable: AI

LONDON, May 27: Amnesty

International said today many

of the killings of Palestinians

in the occupied territories

were unjustifiable and called

on Israel to stop the death toll

rights watchdog said more

than 100 Palestinians had been

shot and killed by Israeli

forces in the occupied Gaza

strip since December last year,

more than 30 of whom were

lieves that many of these

killings are absolutely unjustifi-

able and that some may

amount to extra-judicial exe-

cutions," the group said in a

thorities to take urgent mea-

sures to redress this situation

and to prevent the death toll at

the hands of its forces from

called the use of "massive fire-

power" by Israeli forces against

houses where suspects were

believed to be hiding, saying

the practice appeared to be a

deliberate policy of "collective

fears that the large number of

houses damaged in each opera-

tion and the extent of the

damage indicates that one of

the aims, if not the main aim,

"Amnesty International

The group deplored what it

"It calls on the Israelf au

"Amnesty International be-

aged 16 or younger.

rising still further.

punishment.

statement

The London-based human

mounting, reports Reuter.

Islamic countries consider joining UN troops in Bosnia

UNITED NATIONS, May 27: slamic states are considering joining UN peacekeepers in Bosnia, with Pakistan ready to offer a few thousand troops to protect Muslim civilians, diplomatic sources said late on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

Other countries mentioned as potential troop contributors are Bangladesh, Malaysia, Tunisia, Morocco and Indonesia.

Bosnia's UN representative has accused the United Nations of turning down troops from Islamic nations while permitting Russian troops who have historical ties with Serbs.

But UN officials insist the only countries excluded are neighbouring states or those with a special interest or a turbulent history in the former Yugoslavia, such as Turky, and states aligned with Germany in World War two. About 400 Egyptians are already in Bosnia.

Other enveys said Pakistan

had hesitated joining UNPROFOR earlier while it was still under an Indian commander.

Russia has indicated it would send forces and Swedish Foreign Minister Margaretha of ugglas told Reuters on Wednesday her country might send up to 1,000 troops.

One major problem is that peacekeeping payments are overdue with new debts mounting daily. Therefore, UN reimbursements to troop contributors are far behind, forcing some nations to reject joining any peacekeeping

The new troops would be formally asked to join UNP ROFOR if the Security Council adopts a French-initiated resolution asking for wide authority for peacekeepers to use force, backed by air power, to defend safe areas for

But Islamic states and other council members are sharply critical of the resolution and insist first the United States, Britain, France, Russia and Spain explain their new strategy in promoting safe havens worked out in Washington last Saturday.

A Washington report says: The former commander of UN forces in Bosnia said on Wednesday that the creation of a single Muslim enclave around Sarajevo was the best way to secure a lasting peace in the country.

Lewis Mackenzie, a retired

Canadian General, said this was the only practical solution to ending the conflict since it was obvious other nations were not prepared to send massive military forees to Bosnia and

keep them there for years. "The Muslims are entitled

DUBAI, May 27: Saudi

Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah

has held talks in Jeddah with

top Iraqi opposition leaders

visiting Saudi Arabia to discuss

ways of overthrowing Presi-

dent Saddam Hussein, reports

agency said on Wednesday

night that Prince Abdullah met

Kurdish leader Massoud Bar-

zani, Shi'ite representative

Mohammad Bahr Al-Uloom and

Sunni former officer Hasan Al-

ers of the Unified Iraqi

National Congress, were visit-

ing Saudi Arabia at the invita-

tion of King Fahd to perform

the Hajj, or pilgrimage, and to

form the Hajj and to hold talks

on outstanding relations be-

tween this country and our

beloved Iraq and how to get

rid of the present regime in

Iraq," the group said in a

statement upon arrival in

world knows that the Iraqi

people would be in danger of

suffering the worst repercus-

sions and a true catastrophe

should the Saddam regime

"Our people suffer from Saudi Arabia.

remain in power."

Naqib said: "The whole

"We have come ... to per-

It said the three men, lead-

The official Saudi press

Reuter.

Nagib.

discuss Iraq.

Jeddah.

to one enclave, one state it's called Bosnia-Herzegovina with its capital in Sarajevo," Mackenzie told a US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee hearing. He returned from Bosnia last

"The Muslims would inherit the centre of the country with guarantees of security for their new state. I'm not talking about Sarajevo ghetto, but a significant chunk of the centre of the current country. This option would stop the killing and have good potential for lasting peace," Mackenzie said.

Under his plan, Bosnian Serbs would keep territory near Serbs in Serbia, Croatia and Krajina while Bosnian Croatians would control areas next to Croatia. He said this was better than continuing the war, even though it rewarded

hunger, poverty sickness,

death, terrorism, torture, im-

prisonment an such repression

as the world has never seen

before," he said.
"Our foremost concern is to

rescue our people, with the

help of our Arab brothers, King

last year elected a 25-member

executive to fill the power vac-

uum if and when Saddam loses

power but Baghdad has dis-

missed the opposition as inef-

In a separate report the

agency said Iraqi opposition

leader Mohammad Bager al-

Hakim, also in Saudi Arabia to

perform the Hajj, condemned

the violence at an Iraqi refugee

camp in Saudi Arabia in which

death in march at the Rasha

Camp which holds 25,000

Iraqis when inmates rioted

over the barring of new ar-

rivals. The other dead were mostly refugees, killed when

guards opened fire to clear a

leader of the Tehran-based Su-

preme Council of the Islamic

Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), said

the riot was caused by people

who wanted to sour relations

between the Iraqi refugees and

Allied plan a

reward for

The agency said Hakim,

path to the burning school.

Four Saudis were burned to

13 people died.

The Iraqi National Congress

Fahd foremost among them."

Saudi Prince, Iraqi

opposition talk ways

to oust Saddam

lective.

Researchers find new way to use RU-486

BOSTON, May 27: French researchers report they have found a more convenient way to use the abortion pill RU-486 which eliminates the need for a hormone injection, reports Reuter.

The research, which appears in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine, found that RU-486 works, as well when taken with a hormone pill as the more cumbersome standard treatment of RU-486 and an injected hor-

Feminist organisations have hailed RU-486 as a "medical miracle." But it is controversial because of how relatively simple it makes having an abortion, and it has drawn considerable opposition from groups who oppose abortion.

Researchers say that the RU-486 regimen should not be undertaken by women over 35 or those who are heavy smokers. But it is otherwise safe and effective in first-time abortions when administered in combination with an injection of a type of hormone known as Prostaglandin into muscles or the vagina.

In the new study, of 900 women, researchers found that RU-486 taken in conjunction with two or three tablets of the Prostaglandin-like drug Misoprostol was effective.

Not only is Misoprostol available in pill form, "the drug is inexpensive, and it can be stored at room temperature," said the team, led by Dr. Remi Peyron of Roussel labs in Paris. This new regimen is simpler and potentially allows greater privacy than any other abortion method," they said.

After initially giving the women RU-486, the research team gave the volunteers two tablets of Misoprostol. The treatment completely expelled the foetus in 97 per cent of the women who got one dose of Misoprostol and nearly 99 per cent among women who got two doses.

Off the Record

Cold baths can increase sexual potency

NEW DELHI: New research in London has found that regular cold baths can help fight off viruses which can improve circulation and increase the sexual potency of both men and women, says Science and Technology News from Britain, reports PTI.

Investigations at the Thrombosis Research Institute have confirmed that cold water treatment can help sufferers of fatigue syndromes including Mayalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME) people with poor circulation and potentially everyone. The institute's medical team led by Professor Vijay Kakkari

subjected volunteers to regular cold baths at different temperatures in different environments and for varying lengths of time in order to study their effects on the body and its metabolism.

The team discovered that a disciplined regimen of cold baths each day raised the number of white cells which fight off viruses by significant amounts.

Owada inspires women to take diplomatic job

TOKYO: More women than ever are applying to take Japan's tough foreign service exam, and the Foreign Ministry says the surge is apparently due to admiration for Masako Owada, reports AP.

Owada, 29, quit her ministry job earlier this year after her engagement to Crown Prince Naruhito was announced. The royal wedding is June 9.

The number of applications for the exams required for future career diplomats rose by one-third overall to 1,016 from 764 in 1992, the Foreign Ministry said.

Of the total, the number of female applicants for the exams nearly doubled, from 173 to 255.

"We understand Miss Owada has contributed to draw attention to the job," said a official at the ministry's exam division. He said the nation's economic slump also has prompted many people to turn to government jobs, which are seen as stable.

In recent years, the humber of applications for career diplomatic jobs had stalled. In 1988, the number of applicants fell nearly 18 percent, and since then the number had hovered in the mid-700s.

The exams, to be given in early June, covers seven subjects, including the constitution, international law, diplomatic history and foreign language, in addition to debate and interviews.

Of the more than 1,000 applicants, only about 30 candidates

will be successful.

Women with six pregnancies vulnerable to heart attack

BOSTON: Researchers have concluded that women who have been pregnant at least a half a dozen times are more likely to have a heart attack or some form of heart disease, reports Reuter.

The researchers, reporting in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine, culled data from two large health studies about nearly 5,000 women.

Using data from the Framingham heart study, a team led by Dr Roberta Ness of the University of Pennsylvania found that women with six or more pregnancies had a 70 percent higher heart disease risk than women who had never been pregnant.

With comparable information from a national centre for health statistics study, they found that the risk was 30 percent greater for women with multiple pregnancies.

In both cases, the estimates were adjusted for age, blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, cholesterol levels and other factors believed to influence the risk of heart disease.

'Repent' means 'end is near'

NEW YORK: The next time you encounter a lone prophet with a sign saying, "Repent - The End Is Near," you might want to take it a little more seriously, reports AP.

Princeton University astrophysicist J Richard Gott III has calculated that there is a 95 per cent chance that the human race could perish between 5,100 and 7.8 million years from now. And in the worst-case scenario, the human race could vanish in as little as 12 years.

"The people that have been warning that there might be some ecological disaster in the future that could cause a crash - you should take these warnings quite seriously," he said. "We're not likely to be guaranteed a future that is vast compared with our past.'

The purely mathematical calculations, published Thursday in the British scientific journal Nature, are bad news for people hoping to meet aliens, too. Gott calculated that if we were ever going to roam the galaxy, the odds are we'd be doing it already.

courage colonization of space, "not just explore and come back," Gott said. "If you establish a successful colony on another planet, you might enlarge our chances (of long-term survival) by a factor of two.'

will shut the door on most denounced what he said was four per cent of refugees who Their temporal leader the refugees now arriving in the "lack of serious action" by arrive in Germany are eventu-Dalai Lama runs his govern-Germany at a rate of 4,40,000 the international community to ally granted asylum but tens of ment in exile from his Hima year, was assured on Tuesday resolve conflict in the former thousands of others stay for alaya abode in the city of when most of the opposition months of years Yugoslavia. Social Democrats (SPD) pled

Fresh US move to weaken Iran

NEW YORK, May 27: The Clinton administration is preparing a broad new effort to weaken Iran by convincing US allies to cut off loans, investment, and armed sales to Tehran, the New York Times reported on Thursday, says Reuter.

The administration's plan reflects a conclusion that Iran must be isolated if it is to be prevented from emerging as a substantial threat to western interests, the newspaper said. The Clinton plan rejects the

policies of former presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush, which offered to reward Iran for good behaviour.

At the end of the statement, Amnesty said it condemned

Israel urges US to stay

JERUSALEM, May 27: Israeli officials, expecting little progress soon in Middle East pace talks, urged Washington today to stay involved, reports

"If you ask me whether it will be possible this way really as it is today to continue round after round, my answer would be yes," Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin told

was to impose a form of collective punishment on the inhabitants," it said.

cases in which Amnesty believed people were shot dead while not engaged in violent activity. In one case, an 11year-old girl was shot during clashes while on her way to

the killing of Israeli civilians by Palestinians and called for an end to such attacks.

Palestinians began an uprising against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip six years ago.

peace process

Israel radio.

The statement cited a list of buy milk, Amnesty said.

involved in

BONN, May 27: German legislators, ignoring thousands of protesters, have agreed to tighten the country's liberal asylum laws and make it difficult for refugees to find a haven in Europe's economic powerhouse, reports Reuter.

By 521 votes to 132 with one abstention, members of the lower house of parliament approved the measure, designed to curb an influx of East European and Third World refugees which legislators say has prompted a wave of attacks

> on foreigners. When legislators arrived in the morning, about 10,000 pro-asylum demonstrators blockaded parliament to show, in their worlds, "what it feels like to be shut out."

But by the time the vote was taken after dark, most of the demonstrators had left, discouraged by the length of the 12-hour debate and pouring

to the Rhineside parliament by ship or by helicopter but some had to run a gauntlet of left-

Passage of the bill, which

Most deputies were brought wing protesters.

ged to support Chancellor Helmut Kohl's centre-right

curb influx of refugees

- AFP/UNB photo

"Only if we control and limit immigration more effectively ... can we ensure peaceful and amicable co-existence," Wolfgang Schaeuble, parliamentary leader of Kohl's Christian Democrats (CDU) said during the debate.

The government and opposition were driven to tighten the asylum laws after an upsurge in would-be immigrants, increased racist violence and a lurch by disgruntled voters towards extreme-right parties.

Some left-wing deputies accused Kohl and SPD leaders of allowing themselves to be ma-

Tibetans stage anti-Chinese rally in Delhi

NEW DELHI, May 27 Hundreds of Tibetan refugees with black head bands paraded in New Delhi Thursday urging world nations to ask China to free Tibet, reports AP.

India is the home of 110,000 Tibetan refugees.

have attacked refugees since German unification in 1990. The SPD had resisted giving up Bonn's open-door policy on

nipulated by neo-Nazis who

asylum adopted after World War Two to atone for Nazi It changed its mind after

three Turks were killed in an arson attack in the northern town of Moelln last November. Seventeen people, including seven foreigners, died in right wing violence in 1992. A preliminary agreement

was scaled last December between Kohl and the SPD to ensure the two-thirds majority needed for the change, which will be formally approved by the upper house on Friday and take effect in July. Some deputies argued i

would be nearly impossible for genuine political refugees to win asylum.

Others said the amendment was aimed at turning back more quickly "economic" refugees who did not qualify for asylum, but are accused of abusing the asylum laws of the affluent country.

At present an average of

Serbs: Iran TEHRAN, May 27: Iran on

Wednesday rejected a five-nation plan to create safe areas for Muslim civilians in warwracked Bosnia-Herzegovina, saying it rewarded Serbian aggression, reports AFP. "This plan does not guaran-

tee peage in the Balkans", the Foreign ministry said. "It is a reward for the (Serbian) aggressors and will lead to further attacks." The United States, Russia,

Britain, France and Spain agreed Saturday on creating safe areas for Muslims besieged by Serbian fighters as an interim measure. The plan does not call for implementation of the Vance-Owen plan to set up 10 semi-

cent of Bosnia they control after more than a year of civil By setting aside the Vance-Owen plan, the five nations are allowing the Serbs to "continue their massacres and consolidate their positions in the

zone which they occupy," the

autonomous provinces that

would force the Serbs to sur-

render a quarter of the 70 per

Foreign Ministry charged. President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, mean while,

One implication of the findings is that we might want to en-

Peace seems to be returning to Punjab after 11 yrs of violence unable to go all out because of

AMRITSAR, May 27: After 11 years of violence that has claimed more than 17,000 lives, peace seems to be finally returning to India's violencewracked state of Punjab, reports IPS.

> Paying the price for that peace, militants are fighting for an independent Sikh homcland of 'Khalistan' who are now on the run as the Punjab police pursue a policy of taking no prisoners.

in the first three months of this year, the police killed more than 250 insurgents, including 90 on the 'most wanted list, seized hundreds of weapons and virtually elimi-

nated two of the five main militant groups. "Sikh militancy has ended in Punjab," says Kanwar Pal

Singh Gill, Punjab's flamboyant Police Director General, who heads the anti-militant drive. In 1990, 2,849 civilians were killed compared with

770 militants. Last year, Gill for the first time turned the tables, killing 2,100 militants against this 1,520 civilians Police now say the supply of arms from neighbouring

most impossible to get re-

Pakistan has been stanched and the three surviving milionce more. tant groups are finding it al-

normal in India's most agriculturally prosperous state People are now beginning to go out again after dark, and school children have discarded the 'Khalistan uniform' imposed by the separatists.

Live is slowly returning to

In the countryside, people now do what they have not done for years: Like tending their fields at night. Dogs, many of them slaughtered since they raised the alarm whenever the separatist sought sanctuary in farm houses, bark

Ever since Sikh secession ists began their armed struggle

in 1981, there has hardly been a l'unjabi who has not been a victim of extortion by militants or untouched by the killing or kidnapping of relative. Today, the old stories are told with a dash of irreverent Punjabi hu-"There is no doubt that mil-

itancy has been more or less contained," says political activist Kuldip Singh Dhaliwal. Police officials and analysts

say the election of Beat Singh as Punjab's Chief Minister last February - after four years of repressive central rule, indiscriminate and unrelenting violence and deployment of the army - has worked against the

"Singh's government has demonstrated its resolve in eliminating militants by wholeheartedly supporting the police," says Communist Party of Indian senior leader Satpall Dang, who is known for his unflinching stand against Sikh militancy

Earlier, the ambiguous policy of giving amnesty to even the "most wanted" militants as a pre-condition to negotiating peace with separatist leaders. angered and demoralised police officers.

Said an Amritsar senior police officer: "We were always looking over our shoulders,

the real' possibility that the terrorists we arrested may end up as our political bosses."
The Sikh secessionist

movement was launched more than 10 years ago by a priest, Jarnatl Singh Bhinderawnwale. from inside the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Sikhism's holiest shrine. In June 1984, the Indian

army stormed the temple after hundreds of armed militants "defied the government of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Her subsequent assassination by two Sikh bodyguards in October 1984 led to anti-Sikh riots across the country in which over 5,000 died.

border with Yemen MUSCAT, May 27: Oman

Oman opens its

Yemen in 25 years on Wednesday after the two Arab countries settled a territorial dispute, reports Reuter. An Omani statement said the crossing at Al-Mazouna

would be officially opened on

June 1. The two states signed

a border accord in October,

opened its first border with

ending a 25-year old dispute. Oman and Yemen earlier agreed to build a road link and construct and Omani city at

the border to facilitate the transfer of people and goods.

Killings of Palestinians German MPs okay steps to

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif prays Wednesday after the Supreme Court restored the National Assembly as well as his government, five weeks after his sacking by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan