

# Armenians poised to seize Agdam

BAKU (Azerbaijan), July 6: Armenian forces looked poised to seize the strategic town of Agdam today and deal a new blow to Azerbaijan's demoralised forces, reports Reuter.

Young men of fighting age, ignoring a stern appeal from Azerbaijan's new Prime Minister, streamed out of Agdam on Monday, joining a flood of refugees taking farmyard animals and poultry belongings with them.

The fall of the town, inside Azeri territory just east of the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, seemed only a matter of time.

"Have a good look round. The Armenians will be here in two days time," said soldier Shahmar Alisher, one of the reinforcements drafted in to shore up defences.

"They are all fleeing. They are all afraid to fight," he said of his comrades-in-arms as shells crashed down on the town. Suret Guseinov, a mutinous army commander who drove elected President Abulfaz Elchibey from power in June and assumed the post of Prime Minister last week, has told all able-bodied men to report for military duty or face punishment.

One Azeri news agency, Assa-irada, reported late on Monday that Guseinov himself had flown to the front near Agdam, but there was no official confirmation. Guseinov exploited popular discontent with a series of military defeats under Elchibey in his campaign to oust the nationalist president. Now he in turn must struggle to reverse the tide of defeats.

Armenian forces have firmly gained the upper hand in a five-year undeclared war in which several thousand people have been killed.

# Arafat accuses US of bypassing terms of reference PLO plans direct talks with Israel

JERUSALEM, July 6: A senior aide to PLO Chief Yasser Arafat has made a rare direct appeal to Israel, declaring he is prepared to fly to Tel Aviv this week to talk peace, reports Reuter.

Arafat aide Bassam Abu Sharif, speaking by telephone from Tunis late on Monday to a popular Israel television political programme, said: "There is a plane that goes to Tel Aviv next Friday. I'll take that plane and I'll come to Tel Aviv."

Israel, which was termed the PLO as a terrorist group bent on its destruction, officially refuses to talk to the organisation.

But Jewish state indirectly acknowledges that the PLO directs the Palestinian team to Arab-Israeli peace talks, and an Israeli law banning contacts with the group has been repealed.

"In general, we have rejected this American document because it overstepped the basis of the peace process ... the Madrid terms of reference, and the implementation of (UN Security Council Resolutions) 242 and 338," he told reporters.

"And there is an attempt to bypass these terms of reference."

The two resolutions call on Israel to trade Arab lands it seized in 1967 in return for peace and to form the basis of the peace process.

Arafat said the Palestine Liberation Organisation's (PLO) executive committee took its final stand on the three-page document after three days of deliberations in Tunis, but noted that meetings were still continuing to evaluate any developments.

The Palestinians oppose the paper because it does not spell

out that their self-rule government would have authority over Jerusalem and does not define the scope of their jurisdiction in the territories.

Israel has criticised the United States for amending the paper to take into account Palestinian objections and Washington said on Sunday its patience was running out.

While at Cairo Airport, Arafat met Egyptian presidential advisor Osama Al-Baz for talks on the process.

Egypt, the only Arab country to have signed a peace treaty with Israel, believes the US document could serve as a basis for continuing the negotiations.

Arafat is expected to meet King Hussein later in the day for a briefing on the monarch's recent visit to Washington and his talks with US President Bill Clinton.

# Off the Record

## Archbishop welcomes women

LONDON: The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, said late Monday that women would become bishops in the Church of England in time, reports AFP.

Carey, a strong supporter of women priests, said: "I have no doubt that it will happen one day," adding that he had "no hesitation" on theological grounds that women should become bishops.

Carey made his comments while giving evidence to the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament which is meeting to consider legislation on the ordination of women, passed by the General Synod last November.

This is the first time that the church leadership has openly admitted change is certain to come about.

## Sextuplets die within minutes of birth

ISLAMABAD: An Afghan refugee woman gave birth to six babies on Monday in Peshawar, capital of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, reports Xinhua.

The six babies, four daughters and two sons, died within minutes of their birth at Al-Badr Hospital, local newspaper 'The Frontier Post' reported Tuesday.

The woman produced the babies in a normal delivery case in her first delivery.

One doctor said the weight of each baby was less than one kilogram and the delivery was also premature.

## They mourn and steal coffins

BOCAUE (Philippines): Thieves preying on a Philippine town mourning the death of 279 people in a river tragedy have stolen some of the coffins meant for the victims. The town's mayor said Tuesday, reports Reuter.

"Where can you find people like this who would exploit the grief of others? Can you imagine these things happening?", asked Bocaue mayor Serafin De La Cruz after a number of donated coffins disappeared.

One youth was caught on Monday trying to steal a coffin from dozens piled outside the church, awaiting more victims of last Friday's sinking of a floating shrine.

"I told him, 'Why don't you take a few more,'" said the mayor of the town just north of the capital Manila.

"Several of the coffins were stolen by unscrupulous people who sold them for 5,000 pesos (dollar 185) each."

De La Cruz was speaking as Bocaue prepared to bury many of the dead from Friday night's disaster which happened at the start of the town's annual festa.

A floating three-tiered religious shrine packed with hundreds of Roman Catholic devotees collapsed, pitching mostly women and children into the muddy waters of the Bocaue river.

## Surname an extra headache

TOKYO: Three candidates running in a tight-fought general election contest in Fukuoka, southern Japan, have an extra headache. They share the same surname, reports Reuter.

All three Koga-Sans (Mr Kogas) are outgoing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lawmakers, mirroring the chaos within the long-time ruling party, each voted differently on last month's confidence motion which brought down the government.

One Koga backed beleaguered Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, another abstained and the third voted against his party boss.

Candidates from different ruling party factions compete with each other in Japan's 129 multi-seat electoral districts, which return a total of 511 members to the lower house.

In an attempt to stand out from the herd on polling day, July 18, one Koga had posters printed showing his given name eight times larger than his family name.

"There are all kinds of Kogas around here," historian Yukio Koga told the Daily Ashahi Shimbun.

"One group came from east Japan, one came from China as bureaucrats and another group are descendants of the Han Emperors of China."

"But I don't know about these three."

# BRIEFLY

## 4 more shot dead in Lanka:

Shri Lankan security forces shot dead four more Tamil guerrillas and seized communication equipment and explosives from an abandoned rebel hideout in separate operations, officials said Monday, reports AFP from Colombo.

Troops ambushed and killed four guerrillas from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the eastern coastal district of Batticaloa on Sunday, recovering an automatic weapon and large stocks of food, officials said.

The army attack came amid an upsurge in fighting in the embattled northeast, and only hours after LTTE guerrillas killed five policemen in an ambush in northern Mannar.

## Russian ship explodes:

A Russian container ship exploded and sank in the southern part of the Gulf Monday, killing two sailors, Radio Russia reported, says Reuter from Moscow.

It said 25 crew members from the 'Kaptain Sakharov,' part of the Russian Northern Shipping Line Company, were saved after the ship caught fire and exploded. It gave no further details.

## Israelis kill 2 civilians:

Two civilians, one of them a baby, were killed in South Lebanon on Monday when Israel retaliated for an attack on its patrol, security sources said, Reuter reports from Marjayoun.

Israel shelled a cluster of villages after pro-Iranian guerrillas attacked the patrol. The attack triggered a fierce battle with machineguns, artillery, rockets and helicopter gunships, the sources said.

No reports on casualties from the 30-minute gunbattle were immediately available but two people, including a six-month-old baby, were killed and eight people were wounded in the Israeli shelling, the sources said.

## 10 women die in Thai fire:

Ten women workers died in a blaze in a downtown four-storey commercial building that they were trapped inside early Tuesday, police said, reports Reuter from Bangkok.

The victims, aged from 14 to 19, were asleep when the fire broke out on the top floor of the building which had been converted into a textile factory, police said.

From initial investigations, police said the workers had been trapped in their room by a locked iron grill.

Changyim Asawanontawon, the owner of the building who suffered minor injuries, said she had forgotten to unlock the door to a staircase before she left the building, police said.

## Aid worker killed in Sarajevo:

A sniper killed a British woman working for a relief organisation in Sarajevo Monday, the UN protection force reported, says AFP from Sarajevo.

The woman was identified as Christine Vitkut, working for direct aid.

She was killed near the offices of the newspaper Oslobodjenje (liberation), which is on the notorious 'snipers' alley' leading from the centre of the Bosnian capital towards the airport.

## Road mishap claims 9 in Thailand:

Nine people were killed and five others seriously injured when a passenger van collided head-on with a ten wheel truck in the southern Thai province of Songkla, police said Monday, reports AFP from Bangkok.

The accident took place when the van, on its way from Hat Yai to the nearby province of Trang, ran out of control and smashed into the truck, police said.

Seven people died instantly including the van driver, while the other two died at a local hospital, police said, adding that the truck driver managed to escape.

## Clinton shifts ROK lodging plan

SEOUL, July 6: US President Bill Clinton has changed lodging plans in South Korea this weekend after a boiler room explosion badly damaged the hotel where he was due to stay, Foreign Ministry officials said today, reports Reuter.

"As far as we know, the White House has decided to change accommodation for President Clinton because of the hotel blast. But no official notification from the US side has yet been made," a Foreign Ministry official said.

## Clinton shifts ROK lodging plan

"We do not know what he (Clinton) is doing," a US embassy spokesman said.

State radio and the domestic Yonhap News Agency said Clinton and his entourage would stay at the Hotel Shilla, another deluxe hotel in Seoul.

The US side has made reservations for some 250 rooms at our hotel after the explosion at the Grand Hyatt Hotel," a Shilla spokesman said. But it was not known whether Clinton himself would stay there, he added.

He said most members of the US advance team and now moved to the hotel.

Three people were hurt when a boiler room explosion rocked the Grand Hyatt early on Monday morning.

About 600 guests, including 150 members of a White House advance team, were evacuated after the blast blew out plate-glass doors at the front and rear of the hotel, on a hill south of the city centre.

The blast ripped through the floor at the eastern end of the Hyatt lobby, leaving a gaping hole.

## Iller wins confidence

ANKARA, July 6: The new government of Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller won majority support in Parliament in its first vote of confidence on Monday, Parliament Speaker Husamettin Cindoruk said in live television coverage, reports Reuter.

He said the coalition cabinet, formed on June 25 by Ciller's True Path Party (DYP) and the Social Democrat Populist Party (SHP) of Physics Professor Erdal Inonu, won the support of 247 of the 432 members present at the voting.

He said 184 Deputies voted against and one abstained, the Parliament has 450 seats.

Ciller, in a speech of thanks after the vote, said her new government would give priority to improving the economy and fighting a Kurdish rebellion in the southeast.

"The time to talk is over. It is now time to work," she said. "We are determined to make Turkey one of the leading countries in the world ... (yes votes) are an expression of our nation's desire for renovation and change," she said.

## ROK plans huge army cuts by '97

SEOUL, July 6: South Korea has decided to reduce its army by 100,000 men by 1997, the National Assembly Defence Committee Chairman reported today, says AFP.

Shin Sang-Woo announced the cuts after holding a joint ruling party and government meeting on national defence to adopt a revised military manpower structure plan.

He added that the plan calls for strengthening navy and air force with high technology weaponry to cope with modern wars, while the size of the army, which now stands at 540,000 men, will be trimmed.

According to a latest defence ministry report, South Korea now has a total of 655,000 men under arms.



Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Bosnian Muslim soldier puts anti-tank mines at the gate of the Canadian UN battalion in Visoko (some 30 kilometers from Sarajevo) on Monday. The Bosnian Muslim forces are demanding the arrest of a Croat commander who is inside the Canadian base. Canadian vehicles are not permitted to leave the base unless they are searched by Muslim soldiers.

# Gaddafi offers to help US fight terrorism

WASHINGTON, July 6: Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, predicting "more and more violent acts of terrorism in America," offered in a published interview today to help fight it, reports Reuter.

"I condemn it and stand ready to cooperate with America and other Western Powers to eradicate it, despite what is still being said about me," Gaddafi told the Washington Times newspaper after being asked if he condoned "terrorism."

The Libyan leader has long been accused of harbouring international guerrillas and of funding and organising major acts of violence.

Gaddafi made overtures to the United States and President Bill Clinton saying, "Clinton and I belong to the same democratic camp" and "the process of normalisation (of relations) should begin without further delay."

The United States severed relations with Libya in 1986.

Gaddafi described Clinton as a "kind, well-intentioned man" who "must resist the temptation to demonstrate that he is decisive" by emulating the policies of Presidents George Bush and Ronald Reagan.

"He must be encouraged to break out of the policies he has been locked into and Libya is ready to reciprocate," Gaddafi said.

He took strong exception to the June 26 US cruise missile raid on Iraqi Intelligence Headquarters in Baghdad and said Clinton was badly advised in the mistaken belief this would help him domestically.

"If you get rid of (Iraqi leader) Saddam Hussein you will have 10 new Saddams to cope with in different parts of the world," Gaddafi said. "A new foreign policy must mean talking to people you disagree with — and not bombing them or imposing sanctions that don't work anyway."

Gaddafi blamed both Libya and the United States, as well as other powers, for helping "certain Afghan Mujahideen Guerrilla factions" against Soviet occupation forces in the 1980s.

# Japan ready to take permanent UNSC seat

TOKYO, July 6: Japan is ready to take a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Foreign Minister Kabin Muto said today, reports AFP.

Muto was speaking to reporters after briefing the cabinet on Japan's position on reorganizing the Council. The position will be submitted to UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali soon, officials said.

"Japan is ready to take responsibility for what it has to do at the UN Security Council to the utmost of its ability," Muto said quoting a document on the council reorganisation submitted to the United Nations.

The statement also proposed that the number of Security Council members be expanded from 15 to 20 to reflect the current international situation, adding that the selection of additional permanent members should take into consideration "whether or not they exert influence globally in political, economic and other fields."

Two Libyans have been accused by the United States and Britain of major involvement in the 1988 downing of PAN AM flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, that killed 270 people.

"Libya, as a state, has no objection to a fair and impartial trial. But the enormous amount of pretrial news coverage in America and Britain makes it impossible to select an unbiased jury," Gaddafi said.

# Flash flood in China

BEIJING, July 6: Flash floods have killed at least 33 people and left more than two million people temporarily homeless in central China since torrential rains began in June, The China Daily said today, reports Reuter.

More than 117,000 hectares (290,000 acres) of crops have been destroyed in the floods in the centre of Hunan province, with at least 2.1 million people forced from their homes, the newspaper said.

Elsewhere, authorities have mobilised 1.8 million youths to build earthworks as fears grow that northern China's largest waterway, the Yellow river, might burst its banks, the newspaper said.

But in China's most populous province, western Sichuan, a severe drought means crop yield from 5.3 million hectares (13 million acres) of land will drop 30 per cent this year, the newspaper quoted experts as saying.



MOGADISHU: US residents of Somali origin working as translators for the US army in Somalia Ebia M. Nur (C) Et Lul G Darman (R) Samira G Dini (L) pose Monday with their certificates of appreciation after being fired for anti-UNOSOM activities when identified as members of the General Aideed's clan. — AFP/UNB Photo

# 'Triple talaq' law to end marriage divides Indian Muslims

NEW DELHI, July 6: The right of an Indian Muslim to divorce his wife simply by telling her "Talaq, talaq," has been challenged by a religious decree — delighting feminists and angering traditionalists here, reports AFP.

The Jamiat Ahle Hadith, a two-century-old organisation of Muslim religious scholars, stirred up the hornet's nest when it ruled in late May that "Talaq" uttered three times in a row would no longer be sufficient to end a marriage.

The controversy has divided opinion among India's 100 million-strong Muslim community and set off a debate over the traditional Islamic divorce practice.

In an unprecedented "Fatwa," or decree, hailed by feminists as a great step towards much-needed religious reform, the organisation attempted to end the practice widely followed by Muslim men to divorce their wives.

It ruled that three "talaaqs" uttered in one go would be tantamount to saying the word just once, which is revocable under the sharia or Islamic law.

The decree said the "triple talaq" law would be valid only if spaced out over three occasions and three months. The general ruling was made in response to the case of a man who divorced his wife in a fit of anger and apparently later regretted his action.

The ruling sought to prevent broken marriages resulting from the words pronounced not only in the heat of the moment, but also under intoxication or even as a joke.

The traditionalists hit back last week.

The Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, a prestigious body of Muslim theologians, said "triple talaq" was very much valid and warned that cohabitation between husband and wife after the word is said thrice would be sinful.

"The consequence of the action has to be accepted," said Maulana Syed Asad Madani, president of the 73-year-old body whose members represent several schools of Islamic thought.

Pro-change Muslims and feminists, who are a minority, argue that triple talaq is unjust to women, who have no right to alimony under Islamic law.

# Saddam visits intelligence HQs

BAGHDAD, July 6: President Saddam Hussein on Monday visited Iraq's intelligence headquarters which he hit last week by US missiles, Iraq television reported, says Reuter.

The main evening news showed a uniformed Saddam talking and laughing with intelligence chief Saber Abdul-Aziz Al-Douri in a salon at the sprawling intelligence compound.

As is usual, classical music covered their voices.

It was Douri's first public appearance since US cruise missiles hit Iraq's intelligence compound on June 27 in retaliation for what Washington said was an Iraqi plot to kill former US President George Bush. Iraq has denied any plot.

# Muslim personal law is not bound by the sentiments of a few people

Muslim personal law is not bound by the sentiments of a few people," said Mufti Mohammad Mukarram Ahmed, the Imam, or chief priest of New Delhi's Fatehpuri Mosque.

"If some women feel it is unjust, they should be careful and not give a chance to the husband to give them talaq. The husband also loses in talaq, he loses his wife and the comforts of a household, the Imam said.

Maulana Madani of the traditionalist Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind said one way out could be to set up shariat courts to act against errant husbands.

The controversy now rests with the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, which is to meet shortly to study the report of a committee of theologians it appointed to study the principle of divorce.

Any decision will be within the framework of the shariat. "But in this kind of controversy it is difficult to achieve a solution by consensus," said Waheeduddin Khan of the Islamic Centre, a voluntary organisation.

# They say the Islamic holy book, the Quran, does not condone the practice and that it evolved over a period of time. Traditionalists say the Jamiat Ahle Hadith has misinterpreted the scriptures and is misleading the community.

"The practice is discriminatory," said a spokeswoman for the All India Muslim Women's Association. "It is a male dominated society in which a woman depends on her husband for livelihood."

"The practice allows men to divorce their wives for minor excuses or in a fit of anger," she said. "If it is done in three separate stages, it will give time for reconciliation, for family elders and well-wishers to intervene."

"But the traditionalists do not want change," she added.

The society cited the example of a woman who had been divorced by her husband for disobeying his order not to go to the village well to draw water.

Opponents of change say it is arguable whether the practice is just or not but nevertheless has to be accepted.