

BRIEFLY

LTTE wants ransom for official: Sri Lanka Tamil rebels are demanding a ransom of five million rupees (105,000) for a government official they kidnapped last week, the military said Monday. Reuter reports from Colombo.

The joint operations command said the demand was made to the family of assistant government agent K Amalanathan of Kalawanchikudy town in Batticaloa district.

The victim was taken from his office on Friday by guerrillas of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who are fighting for an independent homeland.

Marcos to be buried Sept 10: Imelda Marcos said Monday she will bury her husband, former President Ferdinand Marcos, in a simple ceremony next month nearly four years after his death in Hawaiian exile, AP reports from Laog.

"Ferdinand will be buried on September 10, high noon," Imelda told a crowd of supporters outside the capitol building in Laog, the capital of Marcos' home province of Ilocos Norte.

"Hopefully, by his birthday, he will be in the bosom of his motherland," she said. "The arrangements for the homecoming of the late president will be simple and will be done with much, much love."

13 die in Chadian clashes: Thirteen people were killed and 135 wounded in clashes in the Chadian capital Njamena Sunday between security forces and demonstrators protesting at a massacre last week which claimed more than 80 lives, journalists at the scene reported, AFP says from Chad.

The dead and wounded included both demonstrators and members of the security forces.

The armed clashes broke out when several thousand demonstrators from the Ouaddai region in northeastern Chad marched through Njamena in protest at Wednesday's massacre at Chokoyam, a village in the Ouaddai region.

Cambodia Daily comes out soon: Cambodia is to get a new multi-language daily newspaper, joining a small but growing number of Khmer and English-language publications, Reuter reports from Phnom Penh.

The Cambodian Daily will carry 12 pages of news, seven in English, three in Khmer and two in Japanese, publisher Bernard Krisher said in a press release. Its first edition is expected in about two weeks.

Cambodia is already served by two weekly English-language newspapers and at least six Khmer-language broadsheets published daily or several times weekly.

Storms claim 8 in China: Two days of storms in central China have left eight people dead, one missing and 130 million yuan (22.6 million dollar) in economic losses, an official newspaper reported Monday, AP says from Beijing.

The storms that hit the city of Yanan in Shaanxi province last Tuesday and Wednesday were the worst disaster to hit the region since severe flooding in 1977, said the Farmers' Daily (Nongmin Ribao).

It said 467 villages with nearly 94,000 people were affected. More than 2,000 hectares (4,900 acres) of crops were destroyed, 148 buildings and homes collapsed and 135 kilometers (84 miles) of roads were washed away.

Deng plans to visit HK in '97: China's 89-year-old leader Deng Xiaoping plans to visit Hong Kong after it returns to Chinese rule in 1997 even if he is confined to a wheelchair, his daughter says in a new book, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Just being in the territory for a minute would be enough for Deng, who claims credit for ending the "national humiliation" of having a British colony on the coast of China, Deng Rong writes in her biography "My Father Deng Xiaoping."

"Our whole family will spare no effort in guaranteeing that his wish will be realised," Deng Rong writes in the book, currently being serialised in the Commercial News, a Hong Kong newspaper funded by Beijing.

5.5m Jews live in US: The 5.5 million Jews living in the United States still make up the largest Jewish community in the world, although Israel is fast catching up, according to an official report released in Jerusalem Monday, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

Some 4.3 million Jews live in Israel, compared with just 1.9 million in 1960 and 3.9 million in 1990. Tens of thousands are arriving each year as new immigrants, mainly from the ex-Soviet Union.

The study, carried out for the education ministry, found that US Jews make up 43 per cent of world Jewry and 60 per cent of the Jewish diaspora.

Tremor shakes Tajikistan: An earth tremor shook northern Tajikistan early on Monday but there were no immediate reports of injuries or serious damage, Itar-Tass news agency said, Reuter reports from Moscow.

Tass quoted the Central Asian republic's seismological centre as saying the tremor reached 6.7 points on the 12-point Russian scale at its epicentre (180 km (120 miles) northeast of the capital, Dushanbe. It registered three points in Dushanbe.

House-to-house search for arms in S Africa

JOHANNESBURG, Aug 9: Soldiers searched for weapons house-to-house Monday in a bid to quell the violence that has engulfed black townships east of Johannesburg, reports AP.

Police reported 34 deaths in the troubled townships over the weekend and said more than 200 blacks had been killed in the area since July 31.

In Katlehong, one of the worst-hit areas, soldiers arrived before dawn in armored cars with machine guns mounted on top. In teams of three or four, the troops began knocking on doors and entering homes.

Residents were called outside, placed against the wall and body-searched, according to an AP photographer at the scene. Police found some homemade guns, spears and clubs.

Police Capt. Jumine Smith said the security forces were looking for arms and ammunition, but gave no additional details. There were no reports of clashes between soldiers and residents Monday morning.

The security forces and supporters of two rival black groups, the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party, have been waging a three-sided battle in Katlehong and other townships to the east of Johannesburg.

Some 2,000 additional police and soldiers have been deployed in the region since the violence erupted.

Australia plans to set up fund for aborigines

CANBERRA, Aug 9: The Australian government plans to set up a fund to help aborigines buy back land lost to white settlers, Aboriginal Affairs Minister Robert Tickner said on Monday, reports Reuter.

Using a landmark court case on native title as a springboard for reconciliation, the fund would assist aborigines whom the courts do not help.

"It is... incontrovertible that our nation was built on the dispossession of aboriginal people," Tickner said on ABC Radio.

UN to strengthen ground forces in Somalia to flush out gunmen

MOGADISHU, Aug 9: UN commanders were set today to build up the world body's military presence in Somalia after gunmen killed four American soldiers in a stepped-up guerrilla campaign that has virtually grounded relief work.

UN sources said commanders of the 20,000-strong peacekeeping force were working out a detailed plan of action that would include a build-up and strengthening of its ground forces in the violence-prone south of Mogadishu.

"There will have to be a re-definition of strategy. The commanders are certainly having to revise the whole operation," one aid worker said.

"A firm plan of action is being worked out. It includes stepping up military presence on the ground that will enable the UN to go and flush out gunmen."

But the aid worker with close UN contacts said no decision had been made "on any possible action to be taken."

Relief workers say the guerrilla warfare has virtually run a ground humanitarian relief work. The UN force was sent to protect. Most aid workers have left Mogadishu and the few remaining are holed up in their heavily-fortified compounds.

They said there was an urgent need for the UN to break the cycle of violence and reestablish conditions that will permit full resumption of the distribution of relief supplies.

"It's disastrous. Relief work is virtually on the half because Mogadishu has become more dangerous now than at anyone time," another aid worker in Nairobi told Reuters. It's even dangerous to leave houses for offices a kilometre away.

That the UN should be stressing humanitarian relief, US President Bill Clinton vowed to retaliate for the heaviest loss the country has suffered since its troops landed in December to stop feuding warlords from looting food aid.

"We will do everything possible to find out who was responsible and take appropriate action," he said.

But Clinton said any US action would be taken in concert with the United Nations, which has become embroiled in full-scale urban guerrilla warfare.

"We are in active consultation with our UN allies about it.

We'll proceed through the UN as our troops are there as part of the UN," he added.

Clinton deflected criticism from former President Jimmy Carter rather than pursuing warlords such as Mohamed Farah Aided.

"I still believe the United Nations mission was well conceived and properly undertaken," the president said.

The ambush sparked debate on the US role in Somalia. Senate Republican leader Robert Dole of Kansas said on NBC television the US role should be reassessed, adding "It may be close" to time to withdraw.

UN special envoy Jonathan Howe, retired American Admiral, said the attack was part of a "terrorist campaign."



Undated file photo of Prince Albert of Liege (L), 59, brother and successor to King Baudouin who died on July 31 in Spain, and his wife Paola. —AFP photo

Asia-Pacific region faces dangerous arms build-up

NUSA DUA, Indonesia, Aug 9: The Asia-Pacific is facing a dangerous build-up of arms which it must corral through regional groupings, academics said today, reports Reuter.

Speaking at an international conference on the future of the region, they said powers such as Malaysia, Taiwan and China were acquiring weapons in an alarming bargain-buying spree that was being ignored by regional leaders.

"Most statesmen don't lose sleep over this one. Who do lose sleep are some of the defence planners and intellectuals who worry about the acquisition of new weapons systems that could be extremely dangerous for the region," said Paul Evans, an east Asia expert from Canada.

Last month, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher warned Southeast Asia leaders against a spread of chemical and biological weapons and said President Bill Clinton's administration would move to limit any arms race.

The shadow of North Korea's alleged nuclear arms capability has long preoccupied the region. But conventional weapons sales are also growing.

China recently bought 26 SU-27 fighters from Russia and is reported to be interested in buying an aircraft carrier.

Malaysia has bought 18 Mig-29 fighters from Russia and eight F-18 Hornets from the United States.

Indonesia is refitting some 39 ships and patrol vessels it bought from Germany and last week was barred by Washington for human rights reasons from buying F-5E fighters from Jordan.

Academics said groups such as the mainly Academic Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific and ASEAN, which has found its feet in recent years after decades of focusing on trade issues, could help help halt the rot.

ASEAN, which groups Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, last month promised a more solid forum to discuss political and security tensions in the region.

Nordin Sopiee, of Malaysia's Institute of strategic and international studies, told the two-day conference that meetings such as those organised by ASEAN, where its members talk to trading partners from Europe, Australia, Japan and North America, has helped to build trust in the region.

There clearly are important examples of arms build-up and a very great upside potential for arms expenditures. This is why measures that build confidence and can contribute to reasonable balances of power at the lowest possible level of military capability and preparedness for war are essential," he said.

But academics acknowledged that their concerns were not necessarily shared by regional power.

UN team to hold technical talks with Iraq

MANAMA, Aug 9: UN team left for Baghdad today to conduct technical talks with Iraqi authorities, days after United Nations inspectors installed cameras at two missile test sites, a senior UN official said, reports Reuter.

Ja Fischer, chief of field operations at the UN office in Bahrain, said Nikita Smdovitch, a veteran UN inspectors headed the 10-man team.

Fischer said the team would stay in Baghdad for less than a week to conduct technical talks with the Iraqi authorities before returning to Bahrain, the field headquarters of the UN teams visiting Iraq.

UN inspectors last week installed six monitoring cameras at the Al-Rafah and Al-Yawm Al-Azim test sites close to Baghdad and praised Iraq for its cooperation.

Iran fears new wave of Iraqi refugees

TEHRAN, Aug 9: Iran could face a new wave of Shiite refugees fleeing Iraqi bombardment of marshlands in southern Iraq, an Interior Ministry official warned Sunday, reports AP.

"If international organisations do not take steps to check the flow of refugees Iran will face new problems," the head of Iran's Immigration Department, Ahmad Hussein said.

He said as many as 15,000 Iraqis were living in "desperate conditions" in southern Iraq and could cross the border into Iran within weeks.

Hussein said 4,500 of the refugees who fled to Iran in recent weeks had been settled in camps in Khuzestan province and that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had been extending aid to them.

On Wednesday a British member of Parliament just back from southern Iraq called for "an international response" to what she said were Iraqi attempts to wipe out Shiite Muslims in the southern marshes.

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Fierce fighting on in Angola

HUAMBO, Angola, Aug 9: Government warplanes attacked the rebel-held city of Huambo in a seventh straight day of bombardments Sunday as fierce fighting between government and UNITA forces continued in the south-central Angolan town of Kuito, reports AFP.

Witness said the warplanes struck with four 250-kilo (550 pound) bombs and two anti-tanker rockets, wounding civilians and destroying buildings.

A graduate of Tokyo University, Fujii was a member of the baseball club there, playing catcher.

He was elected as a LDP member of the lower house in 1990 but left the LDP to join the Japan Renewal Party, set up by Tsutomu Hata and Ichiro Ozawa last June. Hata is foreign minister in the new cabinet.

Fujii: Man in the news

TOKYO, Aug 9: Japan's newly-appointed Finance Minister, Hirohisa Fujii, a member of the Japan Renewal Party (JRP) is well-known in the corridors of the ministry he will head, having begun his career there as a civil servant in 1955, reports Reuter.

The 61-year-old Fujii spent most of his finance ministry career in the budget bureau before turning his hand to politics with his election to the upper house in 1977 as a member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Fujii served two terms in the upper house, during which he was parliamentary vice finance minister.

In 1990 he was elected to the more important lower house, where he is in his second term as a member from Kanagawa prefecture, southwest of Tokyo.

He has also served as chairman of the finance committees of both the upper and lower houses and has twice held the post of aide to the chief cabinet secretary.

Economists said today that Fujii's career in the finance ministry would provide the expertise needed for his new job.

But some expressed concern that his previous close ties with the bureaucrats would mean he might tend to accede to civil servants' demands rather than push the views of the new government.

His experience in drafting budgets may also make him cautious about boosting government spending or cutting taxes to stimulate the economy.

Fujii said in his first news conference after his appointment that he was opposed to issuing deficit financing bonds to cover government spending and that the new government would not raise the consumption tax from its current three percent level.

Economists have said an income tax cut is needed to help boost the economy, but with tax revenues declining either a higher consumption tax or deficit bonds would be needed to compensate for a cut.

Banking and securities industry sources said Fujii was not very well-known in financial circles.

Nagasaki Day observed

TOKYO, Aug 9: The southern city of Nagasaki on Monday mourned the victims of the atomic bombing 48 years ago that killed 70,000 people, reports AP.

Thousands of people clasped their hands in prayer as a bell for peace chimed at 11.02 am, the exact moment the United States dropped the nuclear bomb on August 9, 1945.

Three days earlier, another bomb was dropped in nearby Hiroshima, 687 kilometres (429 miles) southwest of Tokyo, killing 140,000 people.

At a commemorative ceremony in a memorial park attended by 25,000 people, Nagasaki Mayor Hitoshi Motoshima called for the discontinuation of nuclear testing and the abolition of all nuclear weapons.

"We will offer our greatest efforts for the abolition of nuclear weapons," he said.

Motoshima was shot and seriously injured in 1990 and an extremist rightist who was offended by the mayor's remarks that the late Emperor Hirohito bore some responsibility for World War II.

Japan surrendered to the allies August 15, 1945, after the nuclear bombings.

A list of 3,400 names of Nagasaki bomb victims who had died in the past year were added to the official register at the ceremony, bringing the total to 99,245 dead.

Going against usual practice, the new Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa, did not attend the ceremony in Nagasaki, 982 kilometres (614 miles) southwest of Tokyo. Hosokawa appointed his Cabinet Monday morning and the new ministers were sworn in by Emperor Akihito later in the day.

6m more to die of AIDS by 2000

GLASGOW (Scotland), Aug 9: Another six million people will have died of AIDS by the year 2000, a leading World Health Organisation (WHO) official said today, warning that the world faced "a pandemic of vast proportions," reports Reuter.

Michael Merson, Executive Director of WHO's Global AIDS Programme, said in a speech for delivery on Monday to a virology conference that it would take years to find a cure and that eight million people were expected to have died from the disease by the end of the century.

Two million people have already died of the disease which destroys the body's immune system.

"There is no doubt that the development of a safe and effective vaccine would offer an invaluable addition to our control efforts," he said.

"Important progress has been made but the results available today show that we are still years away from an effective HIV vaccine."

Merson said most deaths will be in eastern and central Africa, where the adult death toll may triple in some countries. AIDS was now the most common cause of death in the Ivory Coast capital Abidjan although the first case there was recorded only in 1985.

Merson said WHO estimated the total of HIV infections in men, women and children would reach 30 to 40 million by the end of the decade. Of these, some 10 million have full-blown AIDS.

Up to 10 million new HIV cases would be babies infected in the womb, at birth, or through breast-feeding. This would have serious impact on infant mortality rates in developing countries, where 90 per cent of all infections would occur.

Just five years ago, fewer than 200 people in Thailand were known to be infected with HIV," Merson said. "By late 1992, the number had risen to an estimated 450,000."

In Myanmar and India, HIV infection among groups of injecting drug users had risen to 50 per cent in just four years.

HIV cases had also been spreading fast in Latin America and the Caribbean. Parts of the Caribbean had the highest reported per capita AIDS rates in the world.

Merson said honest recognition of how the disease spread was essential, stressing that HIV spreads mainly through sexual intercourse.

The promotion of safe sex and the provision of condoms was a basic necessity. Merson said effective AIDS prevention measures in developing countries would cost from 1.5 billion dollar to 2.9 billion dollar a year but could halve the number of new AIDS cases by the end of the decade.

Off the Record

First daughter as an astronaut

HUNTSVILLE: First daughter Chelsea Clinton got a taste of life as an astronaut at the US Space Camp and couldn't escape the limelight even though news photographers were kept at bay during graduation ceremonies, reports AP.

Chelsea, 13, picked up her camp diploma and an award for her team's performance on space shuttle simulators.

Reporters and photographers were kept away from the stage as the campers collected their diplomas, but Chelsea appeared blinded and stumbled twice amid an explosion of flash bulbs from cameras aimed by other campers and photographers from the US Space and Rocket Centre.

The president's daughter served as a mission specialist on a mock shuttle mission and worked as an astronaut on another mission aboard a simulated space station.

She returned to Washington with a White House aide Friday following the ceremony where Sally Ride, the first woman NASA astronaut, was the speaker.

Awarded because she fainted during abortion

SYDNEY: An Australian woman who suffered severe brain damage after having a fit during an abortion was awarded Australian dollar 2.26 million (US 1.53 million dollar) damages by an Australian court yesterday, reports Reuter.

Synda Christensen, now 42, became pregnant in 1987 and underwent an abortion during which she was accidentally deprived of oxygen, causing an epileptic fit, the New South Wales Supreme Court was told.

The ventilator Christensen was on was apparently turned off, accidentally resulting in brain damage, the court heard.

Sydney's Saint George hospital and the gynaecologist who carried out the abortion both admitted liability.

At the time of the operation, Christensen had a four-year-old son and helped her husband in his business. She now lives in a geriatric institution.

Christensen was now spastic and suffered muscular spasms, causing involuntary movement of her limbs and body, and making loud unintelligible noises.

Abortion in Australia is technically illegal, except in south Australia and the northern territory, but is permitted outside those areas in exceptional circumstances.

For selling sex

LOS ANGELES: Even in an industry famous for selling sex — the movies — the prospect that some top players may have paid for sex themselves has tongues wagging all over Hollywood, reports AP.

Police say Heidi Fleiss ran a high-priced prostitution ring out of her home, catering to high-profile celebrities, movie directors and entertainment executives.

She was scheduled to be arraigned Monday morning in Los Angeles Criminal Court on five felony counts of pandering and one drug charge.

Fleiss, 27, spent the weekend dodging reporters camped outside her 1.8 million dollar home in a posh canyon neighbourhood near Beverly Hills.

Police department vice officers say the alleged "Madam of the Stars" kept lists of her clients, but authorities will not name or prosecute them.

"We got a list of names, addresses," said Capt Glenn Ackerman. "It serves no purpose, however. We have nothing to charge them with."

Soliciting sex is a misdemeanor, Ackerman said, and prosecution requires a law enforcement officer to witness the crime.

But that hasn't stopped Hollywood from churning names through the rumour mills. Since Fleiss was arrested last June, telephone lines have hummed with speculation linking Fleiss to many of Tinseltown's most famous and most powerful.

Just to catch a glimpse of the humpback

PROVINCETOWN: Whale lovers crowding out to sightseeing boats in record numbers to catch a glimpse of the playful humpback might be disappointed: the graceful giants are hard to find this summer, reports AP.

Armed with cameras, sun block and high expectations, more than 1.5 million people are expected to take whale-watching cruises from Northeast points during warm months this year, many looking for the popular humpback.

But so far only three humpbacks have been seen in the prime viewing area — Stellwagen Bank of Cape Cod — although other species are still around, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service. Last year, there were about 100 humpbacks.

Experts say most probably went off in search of food. Now federal officials worry that too many vessels are ganging up on the few lingering humpbacks, violating marine mammal protection guidelines.

"To see one humpback whale surrounded by 20 recreational and whale-watch boats is extremely unnerving," said Nancy Haley, a fisheries service biologist. "The potential for harassing (the whale) is very high."

Taiwan tries to rejoin UN

TAIPEI, Aug 9: Seven Central American countries have backed Taiwan's bid to rejoin the United Nations, from which the island was ousted by China in 1971, Taiwan's Foreign Ministry said today, reports Reuter.

UN representatives of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama asked Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in a letter last week to form an ad hoc committee to study Taiwan's re-entry to the world body, the Ministry said in a statement.