

Iran renews call for killing Rushdie

NICOSIA, Cyprus, Feb 15: Iran renewed Monday its determination to find and kill British writer Salman Rushdie for allegedly blaspheming Islam in his book "The Satanic Verses," reports AP.



Salman Rushdie

Tehran's official Islamic Republic News Agency said the death sentence, issued by the late founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, would never be rescinded.

In a commentary aired on the 5th anniversary of Khomeini's fatwa, or religious decree, IRNA said: "World Muslims and leaders of Muslim countries have made it clear that no one has the right to alter or hinder the implementation of this decree."

"Salman Rushdie is not a national issue specific to any certain Muslim country.... According to divine laws, an apostate like Rushdie, born into a Muslim household, faces the death sentence for blaspheming prophets and values held dear by world Muslims."

The sentence has to be carried out, irrespective of whether the apostate repents or not, because repentance in such a case is a matter solely

concerning divine mercy in afterlife," said IRNA, monitored in Cyprus.

"Political observers consider the West's support for a sentenced apostate as being a grimace to the just demand of one billion Muslims... Muslims will not forget that insult," it added.

It criticized Britain for continuing to offer Rushdie protection and lambasted President Clinton for receiving the Indian-born writer in Washington last year.

Khomeini issued his decree for Rushdie's death on Feb. 14, 1989, four months before he died of cancer. The decree was unprecedented in modern times.

It caused a storm of international protest led by Britain that has not died down.

Rushdie has so far escaped assassination, but several translators and publishers associated with the book have been killed or wounded by Islamic zealots.

2 Red Cross groups withdraw from Somalia

NAIROBI, Feb 15: Two Red Cross groups have withdrawn from Hiran region of Somalia, following hand grenade attacks on two Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) compounds in Belet Huen on February 9, reports AFP.

In a statement released here on Monday, the International Federation of the Red Cross and the German Red Cross (Federation/GRC) said that after the first attack, they had decided to pull out all NGO expatriates in the region, except the Federation's delegate and a representative of the International Medical Corps (IMC).

UN commander steps up pressure on Serbs Surrender heavy guns by Sunday or face air strikes

SARAJEVO, Feb 15: The UN commander for Bosnia has told the country's Serbs they must give his forces control of their heavy guns by Sunday or face air attack by NATO, reports AP.

Lt Gen Sir Michael Rose's statement Monday stepped up the pressure on Bosnian Serbs, who control most of the artillery ringed Sarajevo, and closed the gap between plans developed by the United Nations and NATO for ending 22 months of bloodshed.

Rose gained a cease-fire agreement for Sarajevo on Wednesday, just hours before

NATO told Bosnian Serbs to remove their heavy weapons by midnight Feb 20 or face air strikes.

While the NATO plan calls for the weapons to be removed more than 20 kilometers (13 miles) from Sarajevo, Rose's plan simply called for them to be placed under UN control. A compromise plan worked out over the weekend in Sarajevo would have allowed the Serbs to regroup their heavy weapons at bases monitored by UN observers.

The Bosnian government said that was insufficient to protect Sarajevo. NATO officials

speaking in Brussels on Monday said it would not meet NATO's demands.

However, Rose said Monday that the UN's exclusion zone for heavy weapons around Sarajevo will be enforced by the end of this week.

"Any heavy weapons there will be either under UN control or subject of an air attack," he said after meeting with Bosnia's Vice President Ejup Ganic. He said that applied both to Bosnian Serb weapons and those controlled by the outgunned Bosnian government.

The ultimatum came four

days after a mortar attack on Sarajevo's central market killed 68 people and wounded 200. The attack is widely believed to have been made by Bosnian Serbs.

Many observers speculated that the Bosnian Serbs could exploit the differences between the UN and NATO plans to delay withdrawing their weapons.

But Rose said Monday's developments mean that "NATO and the UN are completely aligned."

In other developments: — The Serbs turned in two more artillery pieces Monday, bringing to 28 the total they have given up. The Bosnian government has turned in 10 of the about 50 heavy weapons it holds.

More than 500 heavy weapons are said to ring the Sarajevo area, the center of fighting involving secessionist Muslims and Croats and hard-line Bosnian Serbs since spring 1992.

—Saying only a combination of force and diplomacy can end the death and destruction in Bosnia, US Ambassador Madeleine K Albright told the UN Security Council that Serbian defiance would invite bitter consequences.

—She advocated a break in "the stalemate in Geneva," three-way negotiations on the partition of Bosnia into ethnic minorities Muslim, Serb and Croatian.

—UN officials reported a weekend without casualties for the first time in the 22-month siege. That was a "very heartening sign," said a UN peacekeepers' spokesman, Lt Col Bill Aikman.



Ambassador Sir David Hannay of the United Kingdom (L) and Madeleine Albright of the United States confer during the United Nations Security Council meeting on Bosnia-Herzegovina Feb 14. Both support NATO's threat to use air power to destroy heavy artillery within 12 miles of Sarajevo if weapons are not removed. —AFP photo

PLO demands inclusion of amnesty provision in accord

TABA, Egypt, Feb 15: The Palestine Liberation Organisation said on Monday that any detailed self-rule agreement with Israel had to include an amnesty for all Palestinian prisoners in Israeli hands, reports Reuter.

PLO negotiator Nabil Shaath, speaking after the report of Taba of a new round of talks with Israel in the Red Sea resort of Taba said the problem of the prisoners would come up this week.

"There can be no signature of this agreement in its final form unless it includes a full amnesty provision which will schedule the release of all the prisoners, he said.

The PLO also demanded that Israel release prisoners who were members of the

Muslim fundamentalist group Hamas, he added.

In January, Israel freed 101 prisoners early but it has refused to give a commitment to release all, especially those held for attacks on Israelis.

The prisoners, believed to number more than 9,000, were a problem in the earlier stages of PLO-Israeli talks on details of the self-rule agreements they signed in September.

But in recent weeks the negotiators have been concentrating on the security arrangements to go with an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho and a transfer of power there to Palestinians.

PLO leader Yasser Arafat

Israeli jets bomb Hezbollah bases

NABATIYEH, Lebanon, Feb 15: Israeli fighter-bombers blasted Shiite Muslim guerrilla bases in South Lebanon Tuesday hours before the Arab-Israeli peace talks were due to resume in Washington, reports AP.

Security sources and eyewitnesses said at least two warplanes rocketed the hills of Iqlim al-Tuffah, or Apple Province, the main south Lebanon stronghold of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, or Party of God.

There was no immediate word on casualties from the air strike at 9:50 am (0750 GMT). The region has been tense since Hezbollah guerrillas ambushed and killed four Israeli soldiers and wounded five in an enclave Israel occupies in south Lebanon February.

Israel retaliated for the deadly ambush with aerial and ground bombardment.

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BRIEFLY

92 drug traffickers held in Iran:

Iranian authorities have arrested 92 drug traffickers with 720 kg (1,587 lb) of illegal drugs in six northeastern cities this month, the Iranian news agency IRNA said on Monday, Reuter reports from Nicosia.

It said their arms and vehicles were also seized. Since the start of the Iranian calendar year last March 21, Iran had seized 70 tonnes of illegal drugs, up seven per cent from the previous year, an official report said last month.

ANC demands full N-disclosure:

The African National Congress demanded full disclosure of South Africa's nuclear weapons programme Monday, saying it doubted the government has been forthright on the subject, AP reports from Johannesburg.

The demand was prompted by a Weekly Mail and Guardian article based on long-suppressed court documents. The independent newspaper, quoting sealed transcripts from a 1989 trial, reported Friday that South Africa had sold uranium oxide to Israel in the mid-1970's in exchange for tritium, a radioactive isotope used to increase the power of nuclear bombs.

De Klerk last year confirmed in Parliament that South Africa did at one time possess nuclear weapons.

Pak special envoy in Lanka:

Pakistan sent a special envoy in Colombo Monday to seek support for the Islamabad government's draft resolution on Kashmir before a UN panel, AFP reports from Colombo.

The UN human rights commission is expected to consider the draft resolution, which indirectly criticises India, before the end of the month, diplomatic sources said.

Special envoy Khalid Saleem gave Sri Lankan president Dingiri Banda Wijetunga Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's message requesting support for the draft.

Egyptian police kills 3 rebels:

Egyptian police killed three wanted Muslim militants in a brief gun battle during raid of a flat in Cairo on Monday night, security sources said, Reuter reports from Cairo.

The militants were members of the fundamentalist Gama's al-Islamiya, the largest group waging a campaign of violence to topple the government and set up an Islamic state, they said.

Police went to the flat in the poor southern quarter of Sayyeda Zeinab to arrest the three men, who were close to seven militants shot dead in a police raid in the northern suburb of Al-Zawaya Al-Hamra on February 1, the sources added.

Palestinian shot dead in Gaza:

Israeli soldiers shot dead a Palestinian teenager during unrest in the occupied Gaza Strip yesterday, Palestinian sources said, Reuter reports from Gaza.

Palestinian sources said Ihab Barakat, 17, was shot on his way to school during a stone-throwing incident in a refugee camp near the town of Rafah. His death was confirmed by a local hospital.



The Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini (R) with Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) leader Mangosuthu Buthezi appeal to supporters to stop shooting volleys outside Durban city hall in South Africa Feb 14. King Zwelithini met President F W De Klerk on issues of Zulu monarchy in a democratised South Africa and demanded Zulus have an independent state. — AFP photo

US-DPRK talks on nuclear issue likely this week

SEOUL, Feb 15: North Korea and the United States are expected to meet this week in a last-ditch attempt to ease confrontation over Pyongyang's refusal to allow inspections of its nuclear plants, Seoul officials said today, reports Reuter.

"There is a strong possibility that the talks will take place," said a senior government official, commenting on South Korean media reports that Washington was expected to accept an offer from the North to resume contacts.

State radio and Yonhap news agency said the North proposed a working level meeting with the US before February 21 when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports on vain efforts to have Pyongyang accept nuclear inspections.

The media reports said the US was likely to agree to the

meeting in New York but it was no clear whether such talks would be able to break the deadlock.

US and South Korean officials expect the IAEA to declare Pyongyang in breach of its obligations under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) unless it agrees to inspections by next week.

The IAEA could then refer the matter to the United Nations Security Council, which has the power to impose sanctions.

Analysts thought any concession offered at this stage by the Stalinist North would be too little and too late to satisfy the IAEA, which is determined to keep member states within the NPT guidelines.

But Foreign Ministry officials in Seoul said Washington and its allies would pursue a peaceful solution of the nuclear impasse right up to the last minute.

US proposes new plan to restore Aristide

WASHINGTON, Feb 15: The United States has proposed a new plan that would restore ousted Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power, but fears it would leave him with little power, officials said, reports AFP.

Under the US plan, Aristide would name a new prime minister after consultations with both his own backers and opponents in the Haitian parliament.

Once parliament has approved the prime minister and a law giving legal amnesty to the army, top military and police officials now controlling Haiti would step down and be replaced.

Suu Kyi won't accept exile in return for freedom

YANGON, Feb 15: Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in the first meeting with visitors other than her family in nearly five years of house arrest, said she will never accept a deal that requires leaving her homeland, The New York Times reported Tuesday, says AFP.

Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, was allowed to meet Monday with Rep Bill Richardson of New Mexico, a UN official and a New York Times reporter at her family home in Yangon.

In her years of imprisonment, she has not left the crumbling lakeside compound, and has occupied herself reading hundreds of books on politics, philosophy and religion, the Times said. She has suf-

fered malnutrition occasionally because she refused to accept food or supplies from the military, and has sold most of the furniture in the house to buy food.

Inside the front hallway of her home, she has posted large sheets of paper on which she has written Myanmar slogans on democracy and the rule of law, the newspaper said.

One of the sayings, quoting her father, Myanmar independence hero Aung San, reads "You cannot use martial law as an excuse for injustice."

The government has said Suu Kyi can go free if she leaves the country immediately. But she said Monday. That is never going to happen. The concept of driving

somebody out of their own country is totally unacceptable



Aung San Suu Kyi to me, she told her visitors. They have self-respecting gov-

ernment should try." The meeting was the first time since her arrest in July, 1989 that Myanmar military government has allowed her to receive visitors other than her family and doctors.

The government had probably allowed the visit to ease international pressure to improve its much-criticised human rights record, she said.

Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, who has lobbied for Suu Kyi's release, issued a statement Tuesday welcoming the increased access to her and calling on Myanmar's ruling junta to release all its political prisoners.

"The visit is a positive and welcome first step towards what we hope can become a wider dialogue on the issues

confronting Myanmar including the process of national reconciliation and improvement of human rights, Evans said.

Suu Kyi, dressed in a traditional Myanmar blouse and sarong, with her hair pulled back in a small bun, repeatedly brushed off questions about how she has been treated by her jailers.

"Whatever they do to me, that's between them and me. I can take it," she told the group "What's more important is what they are doing to the country."

Richardson will also meet Tuesday with jailed political dissidents, including members of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, and some students being held at Insein prison

Off the Record



A member of Caprichosos de Pilares Samba School performs, Feb 14, on a Carnival parade float in the Sambodrome in Rio de Janeiro. Around 1,600,000 people are reported to have watched the second night of the parade. — AFP photo

Poetry a remedy for depression, anxiety

BRISTOL, England: A study by British doctors has told people suffering from anxiety and depression to try reading poetry as an alternative to taking pills, reports Reuter.

Doctors taking part in the study at Bristol University in southwest England found a few lines by poets such as Wordsworth, Keats or Browning can overcome a patient's need for pills, the daily Telegraph said Tuesday.

With spending on anti-depressant drugs running at more than 80 million pounds (117.5 million) a year in Britain these literary prescriptions could also save money for the state health service, the paper said.

"I would have thought poetry is infinitely superior to any tablets, just like music it is therapeutic," Dr Alexander Macara, chairman of the British Medical Association said of the study, "the pharmaceutical industry might not like it, of course."

Mother plunges child's hands into boiling water

BOSTON: A Boston mother was charged Monday with abusing her four-year old son by plunging his hands into boiling water and then locking him in his room for weeks without treatment, police said, reports Reuter.

Shocked police found the boy, Ernesto Ventura, Saturday night lying on a mattress soaked with his own blood and urine, his hands virtually burned to the bone by scalding water.

Police said the child's mother, Clarabel Ventura, was arraigned Monday on charges of child abuse, mayhem and assault and battery.

"To burn a child to this extent and then lock him in a room without care for two or three weeks — it's beyond comprehension", Boston police sergeant David Aldrich said on local television.

Diana breaks her self-imposed exile from public life

LONDON: Princess Diana broke her self-imposed exile from public life on Monday to make a brief Valentine's Day visit to a London children's hospital, and came away with a card and red rose from her admirers, reports Reuter.

The 32-year-old estranged wife of Prince Charles entered into the spirit of Valentine's Day by wearing a bright pink suit for the hospital visit, her only public engagement so far this year, but her plans for the rest of the day were private.

Heir-to-the-throne Prince Charles did not have any public appearances scheduled for the day. The couple, who married in 1981, will become eligible in December for a no-fuss divorce after two years of official separation.

Mass kissing session

LIMA: About two thousand couples in Lima celebrated Valentine's Day with a mass kissing session Monday, reports AP.

The mayor of the Miraflores district of the Peruvian capital kicked off the love-in by kissing his wife in a corner of Lover's Park, a popular smooching spot graced by the bronze sculpture of an entwined couple.

"In a country with a lot of violence it is necessary to show that we, Peruvians can give love, friendship and solidarity," said Mayor Alberto Andrade.

Man bites dog & kills it

DNEPROPETROVSK, Ukraine: A man bit a dog Monday and killed it with his teeth, reports AP.

The bizarre incident was provoked by a German shepherd named Elsa, who suddenly leaped upon a passerby in a city park, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

It said Elsa probably disliked the smell of alcohol from the man, who apparently had been drinking.

But the intended victim, 37-year-old Anatoly Kosoi, bit Elsa's throat while her owner stood nearby, ITAR-Tass said.

India to allow Amnesty to visit Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Feb 15: India has agreed to allow Amnesty International to visit its troubled northern state of Jammu and Kashmir "on a case by case basis," the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency said yesterday, reports Reuter.

It said the news was given by foreign Minister Dinesh Singh to a group of deputies. "We are following greater transparency on Kashmir," he told them.

India has already allowed four European ambassadors to visit the state as part of its efforts to counter allegations of human rights violation in the state torn by separatist violence.