

Afghan factions ready to start peace talks

NICOSIA, Feb 17: Iran said on Wednesday that rival Afghan factions had told its ambassador in Kabul that they were willing to start talks to end the fighting in Afghanistan, reports Reuters.

The official Iranian news agency IRNA said Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his opponent Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the head of the Afghan supervisory council Ahmad Shah Masood proposed political talks to end the fighting.

It said the three "in separate meetings with Iranian ambassador to Kabul Ghelamreza Haddadi on Tuesday and Wednesday announced their willingness to sit at the negotiating table."

IRNA said the Iranian embassy in Kabul "is studying plans set forth for cessation of hostilities and is to consult with belligerent parties on the issue."

The rival Afghan factions on

Wednesday traded rocket and machine-gun fire shattering a temporary ceasefire and killing at least 13 people, government sources and witnesses said.

Rabbani, Hekmatyar and northern warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum accused one another of being the first to violate the ceasefire that went into effect on Tuesday.

Rabbani's administration said it would have a ceasefire with Hekmatyar but not with Dostum, who switched sides at the start of this year to join forces with the Prime Minister in a campaign to topple the president.

An estimated 800 people have been killed and thousands wounded in the fighting in Kabul, which erupted at the start of the year.

Both sides have ignored previous appeals for a truce from the 51-nation Organisation of Islamic Conference, the United Nations and neighbouring countries.

100 Indian troops infected by HIV virus in Cambodia

NEW DELHI, Feb 17: More than 100 Indian soldiers contracted the AIDS virus in Cambodia while they were deployed as UN peacekeeping troops last year during elections in the southeast Asian nation, officials said Wednesday, reports AFP.

The Indian Health Organisation (IHO) said more than 100 of the 750-strong battalion tested positive for the HIV virus, which causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. On their return from Cambodia last September.

China welcomes North Korea

BEIJING, Feb 17: China said Thursday it welcomed North Korea's decision to resume international inspection of its nuclear facilities, reports AP.

"This shows that dialogue is effective," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Wu Jianmin, who has repeatedly stressed his government's opposition to using sanctions against North Korea.

Wu, speaking to a news conference, also said China's role in the issue is limited, apparently seeking to counter US and Japanese assumptions that China has substantial leverage over its northern neighbour and ally in socialism.

BRIEFLY

Spain refuses visa to Zhirinovskiy:

Spain has refused an entry visa to Russian Ultra-Nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, EFE, news agency said on Wednesday, quoting Foreign Ministry sources, Reuters reports from Madrid.

Zhirinovskiy said earlier this year that he had been invited to Spain by King Juan Carlos but EFE said the King's office and the ministry categorically denied having asked him to come.

Spain joins Germany and France in refusing entry to the free-speaking radical whose party did unexpectedly well in Russian's first post-Soviet parliamentary elections last December, sparking fears of a rise in extreme nationalism. Zhirinovskiy has also been expelled from Bulgaria for offending President Zhelyu Zhelev.

British soldier hurt in Belfast blast:

A British soldier suffered serious leg injuries in a bomb attack on a joint police and army patrol in Belfast, police said yesterday, Reuters reports from Belfast.

They said it appeared a booby-trap bomb went off as the patrol passed through a Catholic enclave in the east of the city late on Wednesday.

There was some minor damage to houses. No one immediately claimed responsibility but the Irish Republican Army, fighting for 25 years to end British rule in Northern Ireland, considers soldiers a legitimate target.

Palestinian shot dead in WB: Israeli

soldiers shot dead a Palestinian during a stone-throwing incident in the occupied West Bank on Wednesday, the army said, Reuters reports from Jerusalem.

The circumstances of the shooting were under investigation, it said.

Fijians go to polls today:

Pfj's 330,000 voters go to the polls on Friday in a week-long election thrown open by the emergence of a new party to challenge the ruling coalition of Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, Reuters reports from Suva.

The Fijian Association, formed by government rebels, has introduced uncertainty into the election, as well as concern the racially divided South Pacific nation is facing another period of political instability.

The Soqosoqo Ni Vakevulewa Ni Taukei (SVT) or Fijian political party, was virtually unopposed when it won the 1992 poll, the first since Rabuka led two 1987 military coups to topple the Indian-dominated government of Timoci Bavadra.

6 killed in Indian train mishap:

At least six people were killed and 26 injured when an express train ploughed into a goods train in central India, domestic news agencies said yesterday, Reuters reports from New Delhi.

The Bombay-bound express rammed the stationary goods train on Wednesday evening at Bangrod station near Radam in Madhya Pradesh State, about 630 km (400 miles) south-west of New Delhi.

Elizabeth starts tour today:

Queen Elizabeth II leaves Friday on a three-week, eight-country air and sea tour of Commonwealth members in the Caribbean, the most comprehensive such trip she will have made to the region since 1985, AFP reports from London.

Buckingham Palace said the Queen, accompanied by her husband, Prince Philip, would be going by royal air force plane to Anguilla, Dominica, Guyana and Belize.

Britain to double number of troops in Bosnia

LONDON, Feb 17: Two British newspapers said today that Prime Minister John Major was set to send more troops to Bosnia as requested by the United Nations, reports Reuters.

"Major is ready to double the number of British troops in Bosnia in a bid to avert NATO air strikes around Sarajevo," said the Daily Mail, which is close to the ruling conservatives.

"He believes that it is necessary to back UN-commander Lieutenant general Sir Michael Rose despite Tory (conservative) protests and less than a fortnight after considering pulling out altogether."

The Daily Express said Major's cabinet which meets today, was expected to make the decision to send more troops to join the 2,300 British already in war-ravaged Bosnia.

Neither paper gave a source for its information and the official British response on Wednesday was muted.

Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd said the request would be studied carefully but added: "I think there must be a fair division of responsibilities."

Rose, the British commander of UN forces in Bosnia, told British television he needed about 1,500 extra troops to oversee the withdrawal of heavy weapons by Serbs.

Greece won't take part in air strikes

US rejects UN request for reinforcements in Bosnia

WASHINGTON, Feb 17: The United States Wednesday effectively rejected a UN request for troops to help reinforce peacekeepers in Bosnia by continuing to insist that strict conditions, including a peace settlement, be met first, reports Reuters.

Separately, President Clinton denied Washington had eased its stance on insisting that Bosnian Serb weapons around Sarajevo be surrendered.

Even though US conditions for putting troops in Bosnia have been known for some time, the State Department said the United Nations, seeking to boost its force in Sarajevo at a time of new diplomatic and military activity, had asked Washington for help.

With NATO threatening air strikes if attacks on Sarajevo are not halted and weapons within a 20 km (12.5 mile) zone are not put under UN

control by a Sunday deadline, the UN appealed for up to 3,000 reinforcements to help carry out its mission.

Deputy State Department spokeswoman Christine Shelly said she was unable to say if the United States had formally turned down the request.

But she told reporters... "the president has laid down very clearly that the conditions for US troop presence are, and I think that those... are the circumstances under which we

would put troops there." Other senior administration officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity were even more adamant.

"I can tell you with 100 per cent certainty that we are not going to introduce troops into Bosnia without a peace agreement and a number of other conditions," one official said. "I don't think there's any chance of that."

Clinton, meanwhile, told reporters the NATO threat "still stands" and that the UN commanders are working out "real and meaningful" control of the weapons.

The president had come under some criticism when he said Tuesday he would accept a compromise between NATO and UN commanders that would leave some Serb heavy weapons in the hills around besieged Sarajevo.

Clinton has repeatedly stated he will not order American ground troops into Bosnia's civil war.

AFP adds: Greece will refuse to take part "directly or indirectly" in a NATO military intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the country's armed forces spokesman said Wednesday.

Louizos Dernetzoglou said NATO warplanes would not be allowed to use the alliance's Aktion Base in western Greece and Greek personnel would be withdrawn from NATO flying AWACS radars.



An US airman fixes a missile on the trail of a fighter plane at Aviano airbase in Italy Feb 16 in preparation for an eventual NATO airstrikes against Bosnia. NATO agreed Feb 9 to give the Bosnian Serbs a 10-day deadline to end the siege of Sarajevo or face air strikes.

— AFP photo

India blasts Clinton's remarks on human rights in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Feb 17: India has hit out at US President Bill Clinton for saying that the United States shared Pakistan's concern over human rights violations in the northern state of Kashmir, reports AFP.

A statement issued by the External Affairs Ministry late Wednesday also criticised Clinton for not denouncing Islamabad over its alleged support for Kashmiri Muslim separatists.

"It is unfortunate that the

president has made common cause with Pakistan in his remarks on human rights in Kashmir and has not taken into account the proven role of Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism," the statement said.

"We regret that no concern has been expressed for the human rights of the victims of the terrorists armed, trained and sent into Kashmir by Pakistan," it added.

The statement followed remarks Clinton made in Washington on Saturday while

accepting the credentials of Pakistan's ambassador Maleeha Lodhia.

Indian newspapers quoted him as saying that the United States shared "Pakistan's concerns about human rights abuses in Kashmir."

Lodhia had, in her speech, urged Clinton to use his "good offices to put the issue of Kashmir on the front burner of world attention" so as to achieve a breakthrough on an issue that "threatens regional stability and world peace."

Gujarat Chief Minister dead

AHMEDABAD, Feb 17: Gujarat Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel died at 0750 hours of a cardiac arrest here today. He was 65, reports PTI.

He is survived by wife Dr. Urmilaben Patel, MP, two sons and a daughter.

Chimanbhai Patel, born on June 3, 1929 at Chikhodra village in Sankheda Taluka of Vadodra district and was elected to the state assembly for the Unjha constituency.

The Chief Minister was rushed to Rajsthan hospital in Ahmedabad from Gandhinagar at 0500 hrs following complaints of chest pain.

ROK students protest US plans to deploy missiles

SEOUL, Feb 17: Student activists, shouting "Yankee go home," demonstrated in Seoul and two other cities Thursday, protesting US plans to deploy Patriot missiles in South Korea, reports AP.

About two dozen students were arrested during a boisterous anti-US demonstration on a busy Seoul street. There were no reports of arrests or injuries in protests elsewhere.

Near central Seoul, about two dozen students shouting "No Patriots" demonstrated for about 20 minutes in front of the 8th US Army Headquarters before being taken away by police, witnesses said.

"The United States is increasing tensions on the Korean peninsula with Team Spirit military exercises and Patriot missiles," the students

Indonesian FM to visit Myanmar

YANGON, Feb 17: Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas is going to Myanmar Sunday for a four-day visit at the invitation of its foreign minister, the state-owned media reported Thursday, says AP.

A top officer of Myanmar's military junta, Lt Gen Khin Nyunt, visited Indonesia last December.

Like other Southeast Asian nations Indonesia pursues a policy of "constructive engagement" with Myanmar.

said in a statement.

Team Spirit is an annual US-South Korea military exercise. Communist North Korea has cut off all dialogue with rival South Korea to protest the military exercises in recent years, calling them rehearsals for nuclear war.

The North also vehemently opposes the reported US plans to deploy Patriot anti-missile missiles in South Korea. Students argue that the US military presence in South Korea blocks unification of the Korean peninsula.

US officials say no final decision has been made on deployment of Patriots in South Korea but that they are needed to deter a possible North Korean rocket attack.

North Korea agreed earlier this week to open some of its disputed nuclear facilities to inspections by the UN International Atomic Energy Agency. Despite its denials the North is suspected of trying to develop nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, about 250 students shouting "Chase out warmongering Americans!" tried to march on the American cultural centre in Kwangju, 250 kilometres (155 miles) south of Seoul.

In Taegu, about 230 kilometres (142 miles) southeast of Seoul, about 300 students ran away after throwing paint at the American cultural centre, Yonhap said.

Off the Record



Frances Louise Parker, the newly-crowned Miss USA 1994, shows off Feb 16 one million USD worth of diamonds at a Manhattan jewelry store. Parker will represent the US in the upcoming Miss Universe pageant in Manila, Philippines on May 20.

— AFP photo

Sexy pose of US pop star enrages Hindu extremists

NEW DELHI: A Hindu extremist group has forced the country's largest daily newspaper to apologise for publishing a picture of an American pop star dressed like a Hindu goddess, reports AP.

The Times of India printed the apology Tuesday for the picture of American pop star Dana Gillespie in sexy pose atop a Bengal Tiger. The photograph, which made her look like goddess Durga, came from her album cover and accompanied an article about her.

Last year, the extremist group, Shiv Sena, encouraged Hindus to attack Muslims in Bombay during the worst communal riots in the city's history. But its leader, Bal Thackeray, was never punished.

The Shiv Sena also is threatening to block the annual Times of India movie award ceremony in Bombay next year unless it creates a special award for films made in Marathi, the language spoken in Maharashtra state, where Bombay and the group are located.

Stabbing 4 people for not showing humility

NEW YORK: A man who was carrying a love note for singer Janet Jackson when he was arrested for stabbing a man on a busy street is unfit to stand trial, a judge ruled Wednesday, reports AP.

Darrell Wright, 28, confessed to stabbing four strangers because they didn't say "excuse me" when they bumped into him on the street, police said.

Wright was sent to a psychiatric hospital after state Supreme Court Justice George Roberts declared him unfit to be tried in the four cases. He had been charged with attempted murder and first-degree assault.

Wright was arrested after critically wounding a man on January 23 with a 7-inch (18-cm) hunting knife in midtown Manhattan. He was carrying a list of 17 names, believed to be mostly of relatives and friends against whom he held grudges.

The rambling letter addressed to Jackson had the phrases "kill everyone" and "attack on sight" at the bottom, police said. There was no indication he ever had threatened Jackson.

German woman follows Lorena Bobbitt

FRANKFURT-ON-ODER, Germany: An unemployed German cleaning lady was jailed for three years on Wednesday for slicing her lover's penis off after he pestered her for sex, reports Reuters.

A court in the eastern German city of Frankfurt-On-Oder found Heidemarie Siebke guilty of attempted murder, arson and grievous bodily harm in a case that has evoked the headline-grabbing Bobbitt trial in the United States last month.

"The defendant cut off his penis and set his house on fire. And although the victim did not die, the attack severely impaired his health," said judge Jutta Hecht.

Siebke, a 50-year-old alcoholic, clubbed her former lover Hans-Joachim Kamplont unconscious with a chair after he badgered her for sex, sliced off his penis with a carving knife and tried to set the house on fire to cover up the crime.

Prosecutor Anette Bargenda had called for a five-year jail term for Siebke but she had also asked for leniency because the defendant was totally drunk at the time of the attack.

Siebke trembled as the verdict was read out but showed no other reaction.

Police found Kamplont's badly mutilated penis in the smouldering remains of his flat. There was no attempt made to reattach it.

PLO-Israeli accord faces small hurdles

TABA, Feb 17: With the larger issues surrounding Palestinian autonomy settled, negotiators are down to more mundane matters — postage stamps, radio frequencies and a police force, reports AP.

Palestinian negotiator Jamil Tarifi predicted that the remaining "four or five small things" would be settled by next Thursday. A final document will then be drafted for approval by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chief Yasser Arafat.

Top Israeli negotiator Maj Gen Amnon Shahak was also optimistic.

"I don't believe by the end of next week we can finish everything," Shahak said, "but I believe we're much more serious now and more clear

things will move much faster."

The postage stamp question was especially worrying for Nabil Shaath chief Palestinian delegate and ardent philatelist.

"That's the agony of my life," Shaath said Wednesday of trying to convince Israel to allow the Palestinian autonomy in Gaza and Jericho to issue its own stamps.

Shaath said the main problem was persuading Israel that details like an international telephone code, stamps and the Palestinian pound are not symbols of a state, they are symbols of any identity.

"Israel opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state — the ultimate PLO goal — but Israelis negotiators finally agreed to the Palestinian

stamp, leaving the question of its use abroad for later, Shaath said.

"I have spent all my life collecting stamps," Shaath said. "I have one of the best Palestinian collections going back to the consulates in Palestine... I have not seen any colony in the world that does not have a stamp."

Tarifi said the committee on civilian affairs had worked out most of the 38 issues on its agenda. Remaining issues include water rights, zoning, archaeology and communications. Electricity and public works were finished Wednesday.

Shlomo Waxe, the director-general of Israel's communication Ministry, said an agree-

ment on a Palestinian broadcasting authority was hours away, pending approval from Jerusalem and Tunis, where the PLO is based.

Palestinians were offered on television channel and a radio station on a single AM radio frequency, with an option to add other frequencies later, Waxe said.

"We think we have a right to more than that," Tarifi said, adding that he hoped the first stations would broadcast from his hometown of Ramallah.

Waxe did not rule out Ramallah as the Palestinian communications center, hinting at Israel's readiness to offer Palestinian autonomy a stake in the West Bank outside the Jericho area.

Taiwan's President calls China 'immature'

TAIPEI, Feb 17: Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui is calling China "immature" for its criticism of his visits to three Southeast Asian nations — and he hopes his next "holiday tour" will include the United States, Europe and Japan, reports AP.

"Our visit was marred by interference that shouldn't have been there," the Nationalist Chinese leader told a press conference Wednesday night on his return from an eight-day tour to the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand.

"We are a mature country and will not recoil because of immature decisions made by (Communist Chinese officials) who failed to understand the world trend" of cooperation,

he added. China considers Taiwan a renegade province and it warned the three countries their relations with Beijing could suffer because of Lee's visits. All three recognise China but have growing trade ties with Taiwan.

Lee's trip was officially billed as a "holiday tour" to minimise Chinese criticism of his hosts. But it was also designed to help Taiwan use its economic clout to break loose from the international isolation it faces because of the Chinese threats.

"Our economy has reached a bottleneck and we must seek further regional cooperation," Lee said.