

BRIEFLY

Queen Elizabeth in Georgetown:

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II arrived in Georgetown Saturday, as Guyanese President Cheddi Jagan said there were no hard feelings left over from a power struggle 30 years ago. AFP reports from Georgetown.

Most of the nations adults recalled that it was Elizabeth who signed the order dismissing Jagan as Premier in 1964 when he refused to accept defeat at the polls. Prior to the arrival Jagan told journalists that both he and the Queen had forgotten the events of past years.

Naruhito, Masako to visit ME:

Japan's crown Prince Naruhito and his wife crown Princess Masako will visit the Middle East in October for their first overseas trip since their marriage last June, a Japanese newspaper reported yesterday. Reuter says from Tokyo.

The government was planning a two-week trip for the couple which would include Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the Yomhuri Shimbun quoted Foreign Ministry sources as saying.

The couple will meet heads of state and visit historical ruins, tourist sites and oil fields, the paper said.

Somali gunmen free 13 Britons:

Thirteen Britons held by armed men in Somalia in a dispute with the United Nations over wages were released unharmed on Saturday, the men's employers said. Reuter reports from London.

The Britons, who were working on mine-clearing operations, had been held in a compound in Hargeisa in the north-west of the country since last Thursday.

A director of London-based Rimfire International, Greg Wales, said, "we have heard that they were released unharmed just before 2 pm our time."

Togolese vote in 2nd round polls:

Togolese vote yesterday in second round Parliamentary elections which should finally decide the balance of power in their troubled west African country. Reuter reports from Lome.

Polls will be held in 24 Districts, mostly in the interior, for the remaining seats in Togo's first multi-party parliament.

In the first round on February 6, Military President Gnassingbe Eyadema's Togolese Peoples Assembly and a smaller allied party won 35 seats. The two main opposition parties won 22 but were strongly poised for run-offs.

Arafat returns to Tunis:

President Yasser Arafat has returned to Tunis from The Hague after a short visit to the Netherlands, during which he held talks with the Netherlands Prime Minister and number of officials. Pool-GNA reports from Tunis.

While in the Netherlands, Arafat also met with African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela.

Talks during the visit dealt with the Middle East peace process and Palestinian-Israeli negotiations aimed at implementing the declaration of principles signed on September 13 in Washington.

Blast kills 5 in Iran:

Five people were killed and four others injured when an artillery shell exploded at a steel foundry in central Iran, the daily Jomhuri Islamic reported today. AFP reports from Tehran.

The blast occurred on Wednesday as workers tried to tear apart the shell for melting at the plant in Esfahan. They apparently thought it was disarmed.

DPRK keeps secret N-agreement with IAEA

SEOUL, Feb 20: Five days after agreeing to accept international nuclear inspections, North Korea is still keeping the news a secret from its people, reports AP.

But South Korean officials say the Communist country probably will stick to its agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency on nuclear inspections.

North Korea's government-controlled media has yet to report on the country's decision last Wednesday to allow inspections of its seven declared nuclear facilities by the

Russia plans to dispose of 26 warships

TOKYO, Feb 20: Russia plans to dispose of 26 warships including aircraft carriers and submarines, in a bid to further overcome its financial troubles, a Japanese newspaper reported today, says AFP.

In a story dispatched from Vladivostok, the Tokyo Shimbun quoted Russian Pacific fleet sources as saying the Russian navy commander approved the sale last month, but had not decided on prices or buyers of the warships.

Russia is to sell three aircraft carriers, eight submarines, six destroyers, two disarmed ships and three others. The Daily said.

Last year Russia disposed of 61 old ships.

China's population to exceed 1.2b this year

BEIJING, Feb 20: China's population will exceed 1.2 billion this year, six years earlier than planned, the China news service said today, reports Reuter.

It said that at the end of 1993 the population reached 1,186 billion and in 1994 there would be a net increase of 15.5 million, taking the figure over 1.2 billion.

A national population conference in 1981 set a target of 1.2 billion for the year 2000. Experts predict that, with a maintenance of China's rigid family planning that aims at one child per family, the population will peak at about 1.56 billion in the year 2044.

Test-firing of Agni boosts Indian missile dev programme

NEW DELHI, Feb 20: India's ambitious missile development programme has received a boost following the successful test-firing of the intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) Agni, news reports said today, reports AFP.

But the success has left Indian policy makers facing the difficult decision of whether to deploy the missile, which has a range of 2,500 kilometres (1,500 miles), in the face of western pressure, they said.

Agni (fire) can carry a nuclear or conventional warhead of up to 1,000 kg and is launched from the Chandipur-on-sea test range in the eastern coastal state of Orissa on Saturday.

The blast off, trajectory, re-entry and splashdown in the Bay of Bengal were perfect and all mission objectives were met, giving a shot in the arm to Indian defence scientists, press reports said.

The test aimed at achieving "advanced manoeuvrability and greater accuracy in guiding the payload to designated target at long range," an official statement said.

It was the final Agni "technology demonstrator" in a series of three sanctioned by the government.

The first was carried out on May 22, 1989 after six years of effort putting India in an exclusive club of nations with their own ballistic missile technology.

But the second three years later, saw technical problems surfacing which led the missile to stray from its course, and another was aborted in January this year seconds before ignition.

Uday Bhaskar, a senior fellow at the institute for defence studies and analyses here, wrote in a news analysis Sunday that Agni's perfect test had allayed doubts over India's research and development capability.

It had vindicated India's commitment to its indigenous missile endeavour and boosted "wavering national pride," Bhaskar wrote in the Statesman Daily.

India has persisted in the endeavour despite protests by the United States that its integrated missile development programme, launched in 1983, could lead to missile proliferation in the region.

Now that the series of three Agni tests had ended, the government must decide what to do, the Times of India said.

"Does it accept western diktat and abandon efforts to deploy long-range missiles? or does it continue testing and technology demonstration of more missiles and in-flight?" India, which in 1974 carried out a nuclear test but has

claimed that its nuclear programme was entirely peaceful, has described its missile programme as a "non-nuclear deterrent."

The country has been to war three times with neighbour Pakistan, two of them over the disputed ownership of Kashmir which continues to be the cause of troubled relations.

It also fought a 1962 war with China over a border dispute which has so far defied efforts for a solution. Sino-Indian political ties have warmed in recent years, but China's nuclear and missile power continues to be a source of concern here.

K Subrahmanyam, a frequent commentator on defence matters, wrote in the economic Times today that "China's weapons capabilities warranted India developing strategies of both non-weaponsed nuclear and missile deterrence."

A deterrent posture had "nothing to do with the state of political relations" with China, he argued.

India's missile programme also envisages the development of an inter-continental ballistic missile with double the range of Agni. It has developed and inducted an array of weapons systems including surface-to-air, surface-to-surface, anti-ship and anti-tank rockets.

Nobel laureates urge world leaders to help resolve crisis Serbs quit 80 pc of artillery sites around Sarajevo

ISTRANA, Italy, Feb 20: Bosnian Serbs, facing the threat of NATO air strikes, have withdrawn from up to 80 per cent of the artillery sites they occupied around Sarajevo, a senior French defence official said today, reports Reuter.

The official, a close aide to Defence Minister Francois Leotard, said the Serbs now occupied only around one

dozen sites around the Bosnian capital. The deadline for air strikes expires at midnight GMT today.

The official, who asked not to be identified, said the information was based on latest NATO aerial reconnaissance of the area on Saturday night.

He said Bosnian Serbs had 88 artillery sites around Sarajevo when the NATO ultimatum was made 10 days ago,

each with between two and five guns. Of the 88 sites, only around 50 were permanently manned, the official said.

By Saturday night, 75 to 80 per cent of the occupied sites had been evacuated, the official said.

Leotard is in Italy for a meeting at the northern Aviano air base later today with

Defence Ministers from Britain, Italy, the Netherlands and the United States before the air strikes deadline.

An additional six Mirage 2000-D ground attack planes arrived at Istrana, a base for French planes, this morning.

Meanwhile, a group of Nobel laureates including the Dalai Lama, South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel called on world leaders Saturday to meet in Sarajevo to find a solution to the Yugoslavian conflict.

The group, which also includes former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, Betty Williams and Mairead Maguire of Northern Ireland, Argentine human rights advocate Adolfo Perez Esquivel and American Friends Service committee head Kara Newell, urged the leaders to confront the "Atrocities" committed in the former Yugoslavia.

"For more than two years we have witnessed the tragic unfolding of events... we have watched the death toll rise and defenceless villages fall," the group said in a statement released by the Albert Schweitzer Institute for the humanities.

The Nobel laureates called on the heads of state of the permanent members of the Security Council as well as the leaders of Canada, Germany, Japan and Italy and the UN, Croatia and Yugoslavia, as well as the heads of Bosnia's warring factions.



A Serbian soldier hands his AK-47 assault rifle to a comrade as he steps out of his tank Feb 19 near the Lukavica barracks, the Serbian headquarters in Sarajevo. The NATO ultimatum for the withdrawal of heavy arms around Sarajevo expires at Midnight GMT Sunday. — AFP photo

Kabul faces acute food shortage

KABUL, Feb 20: This battered capital is suffering perhaps its worst food shortage in Afghanistan's 15-year war, as heavy fighting and blockaded roads have reduced the city's food stocks to a bare minimum, reports AP.

Bread, meat and other essentials are still available in the markets, but prices have skyrocketed beyond the reach of many ordinary residents, most of whom are jobless.

The United Nations and the International Committee for the Red Cross have both

warned that food shortages could soon lead to starvation unless fresh supplies reach the besieged capital soon.

"No food or medicine is being allowed to go into Kabul," Peter Stocker, the head of the Red Cross delegation in Kabul said during a brief visit to neighbouring Pakistan. "We estimate we have one to two weeks of food stocks left."

Afghans have proved amazingly resourceful during the country's long war, which now involves numerous Islamic factions battling for control of

Kabul. Much of the Central Asian nation is mountainous and barren, but there have been no major food crises. The extended family network has ensured that everyone manages to get enough to eat.

However, President Burhanuddin Rabbani's forces have been embroiled in a fierce battle with its rivals since January 1, disrupting the food network in the capital.

Two major markets in Kabul have been destroyed by the fighting. Some 50,000 people

are living in schools, mosques and other public buildings, dependent on handouts. Another 300,000 have been forced from their homes and have moved in with other families in Kabul according to the Red Cross.

These two groups account for roughly half of the city's population. Conditions worsened in recent days due to a blockade of the main roads leading into Kabul by one of Rabbani's enemies, Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Diarrhoea hits Indonesian quake survivors

JAKARTA, Feb 20: An epidemic of diarrhoea has broken out among the survivors of a devastating earthquake that killed at least 215 people in western Lampung regency, officials said Sunday, reports AP.

Umpu Singa, regent of western Lampung, the most severely stricken region in the Wednesday's quake, said health teams from the regency and the provincial health department were working to help the victims of the outbreak in the villages of Suoh and Srimulyo.

Poor sanitation in tent cities that provide the only shelter for the tens of thousands left homeless by the quake is causing the outbreak, said Djauhari Talib, who heads the emergency medical operation in Liwa, the capital of western Lampung.

Singa had no immediate report on the total number of people afflicted.

"The regency now are hit by diarrhoea as the survivors residing under tents defecate anywhere around the temporary settlement."

Most of Liwa's 50,000 residents were bracing themselves to spend another night in tents pitched in open fields Sunday, with no electricity.

He added that clean water was badly needed because all water sources including the state-run drinking water company in the area have been disrupted.

Meanwhile President Suharto visited Liwa Saturday, calling for serious relief efforts.



File photo of French woman Jeanne Calment, taken last March 4, 1993, who will turn 119 on February 21 to be listed as the world's oldest woman in the Guinness Book of Records for the past three years. Now down to 45 kilograms (99 pounds) she has been confined to her wheelchair in a home for the elderly in Arles, Southern France since a hip operation in 1990. "She remains very alert and stable" said the director of her home. — AFP photo

MNLF blamed for grenade attack in Philippines

COTABATO, Philippines, Feb 20: Muslim extremists may have been involved in a grenade attack on carnival revellers on Mindanao island which killed 11 people and wounded 24, police said today, reports Reuter.

Police Director Akmad Mamalinta said investigators were questioning a man in connection with the Friday bombing of the funfair in nearby Isulan town but he refused to say if the suspect had admitted any involvement.

"This could be the handiwork of the Abu Sayyaf," Mamalinta told reporters. He was referring to a splinter faction of the mainstream rebel group Moro National Liberation Front, which is fighting for Muslim-self rule in the southern islands.

Police have linked Abu Sayyaf, composed of young Muslim fundamentalist, to several other bombings in Mindanao in the past year, including a Christmas grenade attack on a Roman Catholic cathedral in Davao city.

Six people died in the Davao blast which was followed by explosions in three mosques in the city, sparking fears of violence between Christians and Muslims.

The carnival was packed with hundreds of people celebrating before the town's religious fiesta when the grenade exploded shortly before 1 AM.

A police officer tried to pick up the grenade and throw it away but it exploded and killed him.

Japan, Russia to resume talks on Kuril Islands

TOKYO, Feb 20: Japan and Russia will resume talks on the disputed Kuril Islands on February 21 and 22 in Moscow, but a major breakthrough is unlikely amid political uncertainty there, newspapers here reported today, says AFP.

It will be the first bilateral meeting on the issue since Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa and Russian President Boris Yeltsin agreed in October to prepare to hand back two of the four Kuril islands off northern Japan.

The Japanese delegation, headed by Hiroshi Fukuda, Deputy Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, hopes to go ahead with the negotiations in line with the agreement, the Sankai Shimbun said.

But the newspaper said no major progress could be expected during the two-day meeting amid growing opposition in Russia to the returns, following the recent election victories of Russian nationalists.

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of Russia's ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party, has said Russia would never cede territory to Japan or any other country.

The newspaper also said the two sides might fail to set a schedule for a planned visit by Japan's Foreign Minister Tsutomu Hata to Russia next month.

News reports have said that Hata was expected to visit there on March 19-21 for talks with Yeltsin and Russian

Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev.

Japan has been demanding the return of the four Kuril Islands, which were occupied by Soviet troops at the end of World War II, refusing to sign a peace treaty or offer substantial aid to Moscow until the matter is settled.

Serb bid to buy missiles from UK firm foiled

LONDON, Feb 20: The secret service foiled a bid by the Bosnian Serbs to buy eight missiles from a British firm to be against NATO planes in the event of air strikes around Sarajevo, a newspaper report here said today, reports AFP.

Citing sources in the M 15 security service, the Sunday Times said that the portable laser-guided Starburst missiles, made by the shorts company, were to have been sold on the black market for around one million pounds (1.5 million dollars).

The prospective buyers were a British arms dealer and a Serb who "has been under the surveillance of the FBI since last year," the newspaper said.

The Serb tried to pass himself off as an official arms buyer from the Slovenian government.

But the pair were uncovered by M 15 and police officers as they tried to buy the missiles from an unidentified man, the newspaper said.

US denounces massacre of 14 in S Africa

WASHINGTON, Feb 20: The White House Saturday denounced the massacre of at least 14 persons — most of them teenagers — who were preparing for a voter education workshop in South Africa, reports Reuter.

White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers said the White House was "appalled by the killings of 'campaign workers participating in the peaceful process of voter education and registration.'"

"We view the attack as a cowardly affront to the process of democratic reform in South Africa," said Myers.