

# Ozone levels have declined by 10 pc

SAN FRANCISCO, Feb 22: Worldwide ozone levels in the atmosphere have declined by about 10 per cent since 1969, but use of ozone depleting compounds is slowing, scientists said Monday, reports Reuter.

Rumen Bojkov, Secretary of the International Ozone Commission, a private group of scientists, said the 10 per cent average global ozone decline includes a 70 per cent depletion in ozone over Antarctica over the last 25 years.

"When we reduce chlorine compounds in the next century, the destruction will become less and less — in that way the recovery will proceed," Bojkov told reporters at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Scientists are worried about ozone depletion because they believe the ozone layer pro-

tects the earth from damaging ultraviolet radiation.

"We will have a few more percentage points added to this destruction, after which it will go down," Bojkov said.

Another scientist said that use of ozone depleting chlorofluoro carbons (CFCs), previously widely found in things like aerosols is decreasing as a result of international agreements to phase out their manufacture.

Sherwood Rowland, a chemistry professor at the University of California at Irvine, said a steady four per cent yearly increase of CFCs in the atmosphere throughout the 1980s had tapered off to an annual increase of roughly two per cent.

"What we have done is put a cap on the amount of chlorine that will go not the atmosphere as chlorofluoro carbons," Rowland said.

With giving details, he said, "We expect that at the end of next week Arafat and Rabin will be summoned to settle six outstanding issues and to sign the final accord."

"We hope that Wednesday we will have something to tell," Jeriah added.

A Palestinian official who asked not to be named said the

# International

## PLO-Israeli negotiators trying hard to remove last hurdles

CAIRO, Feb 22: Israeli and PLO negotiators said Monday they were devoting all their energy toward clearing quickly the last hurdles to launching Palestinian self-rule, reports AFP.

"We ask you to let us work intensively because we've decided to shorten the duration of our negotiations this week to Wednesday," Palestinian negotiator Hassan Asfur told journalists asking for details on the talks.

Jacques Neriah, legal adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, added: "We will refrain from meeting the press until Wednesday in order to concentrate on our negotiations."

"We hope that Wednesday we will have something to tell," Jeriah added.

A Palestinian official who asked not to be named said the

presence of Rabin's own advisor at the talks showed how serious Israel was in trying to reach a final agreement.

Arafat's adviser Nabil Shaath and the Deputy Chief-of-Staff of Israel's Armed Forces, General Amnon Shahak led the teams for the latest round of talks.

Shaath told Monday's edition of Arabic-language daily Al-Hayat, published here, that the "drafting of the final (autonomy) accord will only be finished next week."

With giving details, he said, "We expect that at the end of next week Arafat and Rabin will be summoned to settle six outstanding issues and to sign the final accord."

Under the September 13 autonomy accord, Israel was to have begun a four-month pull-out of its troops from the West Bank town of Jericho and the Gaza Strip but both sides got

bogged down on security issues.

Two separate committees met here to deal with security issues and the transfer of civilian powers, while Israeli-PLO economic talks were due to open in Paris.

Shaath said last week he hoped an accord on civilian issues could be reached this week, but the two sides must still decide on the thorny issue of water sharing between Jewish settlers and Palestinians.

Other topics include archaeology, urban planning, and the creation of Palestinian television and radio stations.

Both sides must also reach a deal on how many Palestinian prisoners should be released from Israeli jails as well as on a Palestinian police to maintain order in Gaza and Jericho as Israeli troops pull out.

The unnamed Palestinian official said the PLO hoped to build a force of 8,000 men, a compromise between the 10,000 it initially proposed and the 6,000 wanted by Israel.

Israel is reluctant to see too big a force for fear of allowing the return of too many Palestinian families who fled Israel following its creation in 1948, the official said.

Many of the police officers are from the Palestinian diaspora and a force of 10,000 would mean up to 25,000 Palestinians — including wives and children — could return to Israel.

Under the autonomy accord, Israel has only agreed to consider the return of some of those who fled the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the 1967 war and not during earlier conflicts.

## Pak army storms Afghan Embassy, frees schoolboys

ISLAMABAD, Feb 22: Pakistani army commandos rescued unharmed five schoolboys and a teacher held hostage by Afghan gunmen for 35 hours after storming the Afghan Embassy in Islamabad in hall of fire, reports Reuter.

All the children and the teacher were rescued without a scratch, Interior Secretary Jamshed Burki told reporters.

"The operation is over."

The commandos killed the three masked Afghans in an assault on Monday lasting less than a minute when the troops ran into embassy rooms where the gunmen armed with pistols and hand grenades, had been holding the boys and their teacher since Sunday.

Several dozen commandos, some masked and firing automatic weapons, stormed the

embassy as explosion set by the troops rocked the building.

One of the gunmen fired before he was shot by the commandos, but his two companions were dozing and unable to retaliate, one of the rescued boys said in an interview.

"One kidnapper was standing in the corridor and he immediately fired his pistol after he heard the blast but the bullet hit the wall," Irafan, 15, said, adding that he saw nothing more because commandos grabbed the boys and rushed them out.

The gunmen had released most of the 73 schoolchildren and teachers seized when they hijacked a school bus on Sunday, but were demanding a ransom of 5 million dollars before freeing the last six hostages.

## Off the Record

### Mayor invites garbage collectors to dinner

TEHRAN: The mayor of Tehran, Gholamshussein Karbaschi, has invited 20,000 garbage collectors to dinner in fancy hotels to celebrate the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, the newspaper Hamshahri said Monday, reports AFP.

The town hall's daily said the reception, to be split up over five days, was a token of appreciation for their services to the city.

Around 4,000 garbage collectors along with several MPs and government officials shared an Iftar, the evening meal at the end of the dawn-to-dusk fast, in Tehran's top hotels on Sunday.

### Cat lovers celebrate 'Cat Day'

TOKYO: "As useless," a common Japanese expression goes, "as giving gold coins to a cat." But nobody was saying that Tuesday, reports AP.

The town hall's daily said the reception, to be split up over five days, was a token of appreciation for their services to the city.

Pakistan and India are close to an agreement of the Siachen issue and the demarcation of boundary in Sir Creek area.

Pakistan on the other hand is understood to have suggested patrolling on both sides of the line of control by the UN monitoring group.

### Rwandan minister killed

NAIROBI, Feb 22: Unidentified gunmen killed Rwanda's minister for public works as he was being driven home in Rwanda's capital, a UN official said Tuesday, reports AP.

Felicien Gaatabazi, a member of the Social Democratic Party, and his bodyguard were killed near the minister's suburban Kigali home Monday night, Lt Gen Romeo Dallaire signed the 32-page document.

Dallaire said the motive appeared to be political, possibly to prevent the formation of a broad-based transitional government. But Dallaire said there had been no change of plans.

Gaatabazi was scheduled to assume a Cabinet post in the transitional government, which was to be made up of representatives of President Juvenal Habyarimana's ruling coalition and the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front.

### Parents forced to cancel marriage of schoolboy

NEW DELHI: The parents of a 15-year-old New Delhi schoolboy have canceled his arranged marriage after he complained to a court that he was being forced into wedlock, reports said Tuesday, reports AFP.

Rajeev Tanwars father Lakh Ram, a wealthy businessman, pledged to a group of social activists that the wedding set for Thursday was off and there would be no pressure put on his son to marry a girl of the family's choice.

A Delhi High Court judge dismissed an application by the boy to restrain his parents after he and his counsel failed to appear in the judges chambers, the Statesman Daily said.

The student had been engaged to a 14-year-old girl in violation of Indian Law, which stipulates that a boy should be at least 21 and a girl 18 for marriage.

Rajeev said he wanted to continue his studies and complained his parents were forcing him to get married and join the family's transport business.

Under-age marriages are rampant in India, with weddings normally arranged by parents after a matching of horoscopes and negotiations over a dowry from the bride's family.

### Gays protest Commons' refusal to lower age of consent

LONDON: Shouting "burn the place down," about 1,000 angry gay rights supporters demonstrated outside Parliament Monday night after it cut the age of consent for sex between men to 18 but not 16 as they wanted, reports AFP.

The House of Commons voted 427-162 to lower the age of consent from 21 to 18. But by 307 votes to 280, the house rejected an amendment calling for it to be cut to 16, the age of consent for heterosexuals and lesbians.

As the late-night decision was reported outside, the crowd turned angry and began blowing whistles and shouting, "scum, scum," "shame on you" and "burn the place down."

The crowd briefly blocked St. Margaret's Street outside Parliament and some carrying lighted candles climbed over police barriers and rushed at the wooden doors guarding the outside entrance to the chamber. Others hurled bottles.

The heavy doors were swiftly shut and none of the crowd was able to get in.

Peter Tatchell, a spokesman for the gay rights organisation Outrage, told reporters outside the chamber that the Commons' refusal to lower the age of consent to 16 was a divisive issue, backed the proposal to lower the age of consent to 18.

But lawmakers were allowed a so called free vote on the issue, voting in accordance with their individual consciences rather than in accordance with orders from party business managers.

"I am not for gay rights. I am for equal rights for all," Currie told a crowded Commons chamber before the first vote, in which her amendment was defeated.

## BRIEFLY

**Benazir in Saudi Arabia:** Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has arrived in Saudi Arabia where she will make a pilgrimage to Muslim holy cities, the official Saudi press agency said. Reuter reports from Dubai.

The agency did not say whether Bhutto, who arrived in Jeddah on Monday night, would meet any Saudi officials.

**French shopkeeper killed in Algiers:** Muslim fundamentalists killed a French shopkeeper in central Algiers yesterday, the Algerian state news agency APS said. Reuter reports from Paris.

APS, monitored in Paris, said Joaquin Grau, 52, was attacked in his bookshop by "terrorists" — the term used by Algerian authorities for Muslim fundamentalists — and died in hospital.

**Blast kills 16 in China:** Exploding crates of firecrackers killed 16 people and injured seven at a fireworks market in north China, a Beijing-run newspaper in Hong Kong said Tuesday, AP reports from Hong Kong.

The February 5 explosion at Yuan Shi country in Hebei Province blew out doors and windows from surrounding buildings and destroyed 11 tractors and more than a dozen bicycles, Wen Wei Po said.

A spark ignited several crates of firecrackers, triggering the blast, the newspaper said. It said stall managers had broken safety regulations.

**State of alert in Gabon:** Gabon introduced a curfew and banned demonstrations late Monday as the government imposed a nationwide "state of alert" following unrest during the first day of a general strike, said government spokesman Patrice Nzengui, AFP reports from Libreville.

The state of alert, a step below a state of emergency, was imposed after an emergency cabinet meeting following disturbances in Libreville during a national strike.

Strikers were demanding wage rises in the wake of the 50% per cent devaluation of the CFA franc in December.

**Indian airforce plane crashes:** A MiG-20 aircraft of the Indian airforce crashed at Dekeriaon in Nagaon district of central Assam on Monday, killing the one pilot, according to official sources here, PTI reports from Guwahati.

The aircraft broke into several pieces as it hit the ground, the sources said. The pilot has been identified as PP Upendra.

The cause of the crash is being investigated. This is the second time this year that a aircraft, belonging to the defence forces, crashed. Just last month a defence aircraft crashed killing its trainee pilot in Dhubri district in lower Assam.

**11 army officers jailed in Peru:** Peru's top military court on Monday sentenced 11 army officers to up to 20 years in military custody for the 1992 slayings of nine students and a professor suspected of guerrilla activity, Reuter reports from Lima.

Two major received the harshest penalty for having directed a special squad that entered the La Santista University campus and abducted the 10 on July 17, 1992. They were murdered hours later at a police firing range outside Lima.

An officer of the supreme council of military justice ready out the sentences, which will be served at a military base.

**Sikhs kill 2 policemen:** In an increasingly rare incident, Sikh militants killed two guards at the house of a government officials and fled with their victims' weapons, police said Tuesday, AP reports from Amritsar.

Two men raided the guard room outside the home of a district official in the town of Ropar Monday night. They stabbed one policeman and shot the other after grabbing his gun.

The assailants fled with four rifles, said the town's police chief, Ajit Singh. Ropar is 230 kilometers (140 miles) from Amritsar.

It was only the second major attack this year attributed to Sikh militants in Punjab, the northern states where separatists were once accused of dozens of attacks every month.

The separatist campaign was virtually crushed in a yearlong police crackdown that began in 1992.

## Japan may slow down N-power projects

**TOKYO, Feb 22:** Apparently responding to concerns about its plutonium policy, Japan may drastically slow down a series of nuclear power projects, government officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

The Science and Technology Agency is considering the delays because it believes earlier estimates of how much plutonium Japan would need in the next century were too high, according to Yasutaka Moriguchi at the agency's nuclear fuel division.

But media commentators and other analysts say the moves show Japan in bowing to international criticism of its plans to use plutonium, a highly toxic and radioactive material, to make electric power.

The delays would affect several projects. Plutonium can also be used in nuclear weapons.

One plant is already under

construction in Rokkasho, northern Japan, but the finalization of details for the second plant will be put off until about 2010, when it was originally scheduled to start operation. Moriguchi said.

He said the delay was being considered because demand for plutonium is expected to be less than originally thought, and Japan has said it would not stockpile more plutonium than it needs.

The final decision, which is expected to affect Europe's fuel recycling business, is to be announced in the next few months as part of Japan's long-term nuclear power programme.

Several countries have abandoned plans to use plutonium to produce power for both economic and security reasons, leaving Japan as the only major country actively pursuing plutonium as an energy source.



— AFP photo

## 10 killed as rival Yemeni army units clash despite truce

**SANAA, Feb 22:** Northern Yemeni soldiers clashed with rival troops and surrounded a southern city with tanks despite a peace accord signed by Yemen's feuding leaders, local residents said on Monday.

Residents in Zinjubar told Reuters at least 10 soldiers were killed in fighting between northern and southern army units in the city. 70 kilometers (45 miles) east of the port city of Aden, on Monday.

"But Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh and Vice-President Ali Salem Al-Baidh, estranged for months by a political quarrel, both moved to the north and south Yemen merged. But the unified country has been plagued by political violence and a breakdown in law and order.

Earlier report says: Feuding Yemeni leaders signed a reconciliation agreement Sunday to end a six-month leadership crisis and bring about political and economic reforms that would ease tensions between the north and south.

The agreement envisages, among other things, a dilution of presidential powers and de-

centralization of authority aimed at better distribution of resources and economic development in the Red Sea nation.

In state ceremony in Amman, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his vice president, Ali