

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 Reuters.

Rumen Bjokov, 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 be much less and less — in that way the recovery will proceed," Bjokov 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-

tection the earth from damaging ultraviolet radiation.

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

Another scientist said that use of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (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 into the atmosphere as chlorofluorocarbons," Rowland said.

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 Neria, 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 adviser 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 a hail of fire, reports Reuters.

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 dazed 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," Irfan, 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.

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, Reuters 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, Reuters 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 fireworks 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 fireworks, 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 Nziengui, 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 Dekergaon in Nagaoon 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 for the second time this year that an 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, Reuters reports from Lima.

Two major received the harshest penalty for having directed a special squad that entered the La Gántuta 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 official 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 (143 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.



Activists from the youth wing of the ruling Congress (I) party burn an effigy of Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto yesterday near the Pakistan Embassy in New Delhi. The demonstrators numbering 200, were protesting Pakistan's alleged involvement in the separatist movement in Kashmir. — 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 end the fighting, a Defence Ministry spokesman said.

"President Saleh and Vice-President Al-Baidh gave instructions to contain the incident and carry out a quick investigation of its ramifications," the spokesman told Yemen's official Saba news agency.

"The regrettable incident has been contained," he added.

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 Salem Al-Baidh, signed the 32-page document.

Beidh and his southern Yemeni followers have accused the northern Yemenis, who are led by Saleh, of trying to dominate the country and failing to properly unify the armed forces.

In May 1990, the former north and south Yemen merged. But the unified country has been plagued by political violence and a breakdown in law and order.

India to study Pak proposals

NEW DELHI, Feb. 22: India on Monday told Pakistan that it would study in detail Islamabad's counter proposals in response to its six proposals on resolving bilateral issues, reports PTI.

The acting High Commissioner of Pakistan, Shahid Malik, handed his country's counter proposals to Bhadr Kumar, the joint secretary in the External Affairs Ministry.

India's proposals sent on January 24 last included additional confidence building measures on the nuclear issue and stabilising the situation along the line of control in Jammu and Kashmir without prejudice to each other's claim.

India and Pakistan 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 Gataabazi, 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 said.

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

Gataabazi 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.

UN resumes relief operation in northern Lanka

COLOMBO, Feb. 22: United Nations officials have begun relief operations in rebel-held northern Sri Lanka, three months after they evacuated following local protests, reports AP.

An international field officer, two local assistants and five other local staff resumed work at the open relief center at Madhu in northwestern Sri Lanka, David Adrian, a UNHCR field coordinator in northern Vavuniya town said Monday.

Workers of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees were involved in escorting food and medicine to northern Sri Lanka, an area sealed off by the army that is trying to crush an 11-year rebellion for an independent Tamil homeland.

British hawk fighter arrives in Malaysia

KUALA Lumpur, Feb. 22. The first of 28 British hawk fighters, which Malaysia bought in an arms deal that has caused problems for both governments, arrived on Monday, reports Reuters.

Malaysian air force officials said the first hawk 100 landed at Butterworth air force base across from the northern island of Penang and a second was due in later on Monday or Tuesday.

Malaysia has agreed to buy 10 hawk 100 trainer fighters and 18 hawk 200 fighters as part of a one billion pound defence deal 1.46 billion US dollars signed with Britain in 1988.

Off the Record

Mayor invites garbage collectors to dinner

TEHRAN: The mayor of Tehran, Gholamshusein 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.

February 22 is Cat Day in Japan, and folks from around the country celebrate by flaunting talented tabbies in a nationwide cat contest.

And while Japanese usually cherish conformity, judges at the Eighth Annual Cat Day Festival look for felines that pad to their own beat.

"Our criteria for cats is how they bring us joy. How they tickle our funny bone," said one Cat Day Festival judge, Naoki Yanase. "We don't care about pedigree. We look for uniqueness."

The audience oohed, awed and meowed as the nation's 10 most unique cats, selected from hundreds of entrants, strutted their stuff.

Among contestants were Mini, a cat that likes to eat her sliced cheese standing upright and holding it between two paws, Meow, who balances a toy mouse on her nose and dances, and a long-haired Persian cat that could have been mistaken for a cotton ball-covered yak.

Judges scrutinized the parade of animals and quizzed owners on such timeless mysteries as "Why are there guard dogs, but no guard cats," and "What do cats think about when they stare into space?"

The winner of the contest was Myu, who perches on the shoulder of owner Tak Fukushima wherever he goes.

"I've always been the only person walking around shopping areas with a cat on my shoulder," said Fukushima. "I hope my winning this prize will encourage others to walk around with their cats."

Among runners-up were the team of Chibime and Gon, a cat and a meter (yard)-long iguana couple that eat, sleep and even travel in the same carrier together.

"They look just like husband and wife," one judge cooed as the inseparable beasts cuddled together on stage.

Cat Day falls on February 22 because a cat's meow sounds like "ni," the Japanese word for the number two. Thus, the 22nd day of the second month was deemed particularly felicitous for felines.

"We have a year of the Dog and Year of the Mouse," said Yanase. "So it's only right to have a Day of the Cat."

Parents forced to cancel marriage of schoolboy

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

Rajeev Tanwar's father Lakhmi 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 AP.

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 disgrace.

"The anger of the crowd was entirely justifiable given that Parliament had voted to deny us human rights," he said.

Prime Minister John Major, seeking compromise on 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.



Seven Japanese women, covered with a "We'd Rather Be Naked Than Wear Fur" banner, shout slogans to protest against the Fur and Fashion Japan Show, sponsored by Frankfurt Fair Company and Japan Fur Association in Yokohama yesterday. The anti-fur performance has already been given in America, England, Germany and Italy. — AFP photo