

BRIEFLY

Blast wounds UK soldiers: A number of British security forces were injured on Saturday when an explosion rocked a Northern Ireland military base, police said. Reuter reports from Belfast.

The royal Ulster constabulary said the army and police base at Crossmaglen, south Armagh, came "under attack" on Saturday evening and the security forces suffered a number of casualties. The number of those hurt and the extent of their injuries was not immediately known.

Prominent Pak scholar dies: Maulana Kausar Niazi, a prominent Pakistani Islamic scholar and former minister, died in Islamabad Saturday, the official Associated Press of Pakistan said. AFP reports from Islamabad.

Niazi, 60, was admitted to a hospital on Wednesday after suffering a heart attack and brain hemorrhage, the agency said.

Bomb blast in Baku, 12 killed: A powerful bomb blast tore through a crowded metro train in the Azerbaijan capital Baku on Saturday, killing at least 12 people and injuring 53, the Interior Ministry said. Reuter reports from Baku.

"Investigators have determined that this was an act of sabotage," said a statement after the bombing, which significantly raised tensions in the crisis-ridden Transcaucasian country on the eve of the Muslim New Year.

The ministry said the bomb, detonated by a timing mechanism, exploded in early afternoon inside the first carriage of the train at a platform in the central "January 20" metro station.

24 more Sikh militants surrender: Twenty-four Sikh militants surrendered to the police Saturday in the northern Indian state of Punjab, where a decade-old separatist campaign has claimed more than 25,000 lives, AFP reports from New Delhi.

The Press Trust of India news agency said the insurgents belonging to separate militant organisations surrendered with their weapons before Punjab Police Chief Kanwar Pal Singh Gill in Batala district.

More than 700 Sikh separatists have surrendered during the past two years to Gill, who is credited with breaking the backbone of the bloody drive which erupted in Punjab 10 years ago.

US to reopen embassy in Bosnia: The United States plans to reopen its Sarajevo embassy, possibly with a few weeks, as a result of a ceasefire in Bosnia and an accord signed by the state's Muslims and Croats, the White House said Saturday, AFP reports from Washington.

The White House said President Bill Clinton informed Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic of the decision at a meeting Friday after the signing of the federation agreement and "reaffirmed the intention of the US to participate in the implementation of a viable peace agreement among the parties in Bosnia."

Clinton told Croatian president Franjo Tudjman that Washington would provide 3.5 million dollars in medical assistance to Croatia and would allow the Zagreb government to open four US consulates, in New York, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Ohio, Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania.

Dalai Lama in Tel Aviv: Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists, arrived in Tel Aviv yesterday on his first trip to Israel for a five-day private visit, his hosts said, AFP reports from Tel Aviv.

The Dalai Lama was invited by the Israeli Society for the Protection of Nature (SPN) and is to attend ceremonies in the Red Sea resort of Eilat marking the organisation's 40th anniversary, an SPN spokesman said.

No meeting with Israeli officials has been scheduled.

Khmer Rouge guerilla base falls to govt forces

PIIOM PENH, Mar 20: Cambodia's government says it has captured the Khmer Rouge guerillas' main base and expressed confidence today that its army would be able to hold it, reports Reuter.

"We have thousands of troops — we can control it," said secretary of state for information Khieu Kanharith.

He said soldiers entered the western town of Pailin at 6 pm (100 GMT) on Saturday after attacking Khmer Rouge defensive positions in the surrounding hills with artillery, rockets and rocket-firing helicopters.

The report of the capture could not immediately be independently confirmed.

Kanharith said controlling the hills was the key to holding the town and there would be no repeat of a humiliation reverse at the Maoist Khmer Rouge's northern stronghold of Anlong Veng last month.

Government troops took that town but were forced out again by a fierce guerilla counter-attack.

Some Cambodian army officers in Battambang province have expressed concern that the guerillas — the last group still fighting despite a United Nations-sponsored peace pact — would use the same tactics at Pailin.

Western diplomats have said that taking Pailin could be a mistake for the government and be little more than a symbolic victory. They said the Asrea would be difficult to hold.

Kanharith said the army controlled all the hills except

some near the Thai border.

Thai military sources on the border said today that heavy fighting was under way inside Cambodia but they were unable to confirm that Pailin had fallen.

There was heavy shelling about 30 km (18 miles) inside Cambodia, they said.

The sources said they had received reports that some 1,000 Cambodian civilians from the Pailin area were heading towards the frontier to escape the fighting.

Pak opposition leader escapes attempt on life

PESHAWAR, Mar 20: A top Pakistani opposition leader Nasim Wali Khan today escaped an assassination attempt but his driver was hospitalised with bullet injuries, police and party officials said, reports AFP.

Nasim, who leads the left-leaning Awami National Party (ANP) was on way from her northwestern hometown of Charsadda to Peshawar when gunmen armed with automatic weapons waylaid her vehicle.

The attackers crippled the vehicle by bursting two of its tyres and then sprayed it with bullets, smashing the windshield, they said.

Her driver was shot and taken to hospital while Nasim received first aid.

70 German citizens removed from Kurdish town

ANKARA, Mar 20: Turkish authorities on Saturday removed more than 70 German nationals from the Southeastern Kurdish-majority towns of Van and Diyarbakir where they had been intending to join in celebrations of the Kurdish new year, reports AFP.

Most of them were to be expelled from Turkey, according to officials here.

Zulu King declares to found sovereign state OAU rejects any attempt aimed at dividing South Africa

HARARE, Mar 20: The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), meeting after South Africa's Zulu King declared he would found a sovereign state, urged all parties on Saturday to preserve South Africa's unity, reports Reuter.

"The OAU rejects any and all attempt aimed at dividing South Africa because that constitutes a serious threat to peace and stability in South Africa and the region at large," the OAU's 13-member committee on Southern Africa said after a one-day meeting.

Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini declared on Friday he would set up a sovereign state and defend it at all costs.

Mangosuthu Buthelez,

leader of the mainly Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party, refuses to take part in the April 26-28 all-race elections — as do right-wing whites who also want their own state.

"The committee expressed grave concern at recent statements emanating from the leaders of KwaZulu aimed at fracturing the unity of the country," the OAU said in a communiqué.

"We call upon the South African government and all the political leaders to take the necessary measures to safeguard the unity and territorial integrity of South Africa."

"The OAU appeals to the sense of patriotism of leaders and parties boycotting and

those threatening to disrupt the process to reconsider their positions," the committee said.

Asked at a press conference whether the OAU was prepared to use force to preserve this unity, OAU Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim would only say: "The OAU position is, and has always been, firm and very clear — we will support moves for a unitary South Africa."

Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe told the meeting that the declaration of a sovereign Zulu state would lead to disaster. He also called on Buthelez to rethink his boycott.

Mugabe said Africa had

watched with trepidation while an alliance of South African rightwingers including Buthelez stalled the democratic process.

In a clear reference to Zulu leaders, Mugabe said he was sad to see that some black South Africans were being used by white ultra-rightists to revive apartheid.

He called on OAU members to give substantial financial and material support to Nelson Mandela's African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress ahead of the elections.

The ANC is expected to win the polls comfortably and set up a government of national unity.

US 'too dangerous' for children: Clinton

WASHINGTON, Mar 20: President Clinton told a group of children at the White House Saturday that the United States is "too dangerous" and said if he had one wish, it would be for a safe childhood for all of them, reports Reuter.

In a televised "town hall" meeting with 50 children, Clinton said America had been a lot safer when he was growing, and the thought many of today's children had been born into a "pretty lousy situation."

His audience included Annie Nichol, the younger sister of Polly Klaas, who was abducted from her Petaluma, California, home last October 1 and killed. The accused killer has a long criminal record.

Seven-year-old Annie wondered a loud to the president if she would live to grow up, saying, "I just don't feel safe." "You do live in a country that's too dangerous," Clinton told her. "And we have to make it less dangerous. And it is a huge obligation that I feel, and I think about it every day."

"You know, I have a little girl too," he said, referring to his 14-year-old daughter, Chelsea.

Clinton said among the things that had made America less safe were the proliferation of assault weapons and release

from prison of people who have committed several violent felonies. He said he was trying to change this through a proposed anti-crime bill.

"When I was a kid, people beat each other up... nobody ever shot anybody," the 47-year-old president said.

Clinton took questions from the children for 90 minutes in a session televised nationally by ABC, which selected the participants. They were all Americans with the exception of Zlata Filipovic, a 13-year-old Sarajevo girl who has written a diary of the Bosnian war.

The children raised subjects ranging from health care and cigarettes to cancer and abortion. One boy made a plea not to raise federal cattle-grazing fees, saying it would destroy his family's ranch.

There were some light-hearted moments, as when the president denied reports that his cat Sox had a bulletproof case. But the session was mostly serious, and safety was a recurring theme.

Clinton told Zlata that he thought the end of war in Bosnia was closer, but said it partly depended on whether the Bosnian Serbs agree to sign on to a federation agreement between the Bosnian Croats and Muslims.

Teen-ager to die for killing 3 boys

JONESBORO, Ark, Mar 20: A teen-ager was sentenced to death Saturday for the murder of three 8-year-old boys whose bodies were found naked, battered and hogtied. An accomplice was sentenced to life in prison without parole, reports AP.

Damien Echols, 19, and Charles Jason Baldwin, 16, each were convicted Friday of three counts of capital murder. The same jury that convicted them recommended death by injection for Echols and life in prison without parole for Baldwin.

Anti-racism demonstration in London

LONDON, Mar 20: About 25,000 people marched through east London yesterday in one of the largest anti-racism demonstrations in the city for years, reports Xinhua.

The march organised by Britain's trade union congress passed through ethnically mixed areas of east London where violent attacks on Asians and blacks have been increasing.

The extremist and racist British National Party (BNP) won its first local council seat in the area last year, which prompted violent protests and clashes between demonstrators and police when BNP headquarters.

The racism and anti-immigrant resentment have been fuelled by housing and job shortages.

Off the Record

Diana breaks traffic rules

LONDON: Princess Diana broke Britain's traffic rules on Saturday by leaving her car in a restricted parking zone, but it was the two policemen who let her get away with the misdemeanor who ended up in trouble, reports Reuter.

British police confirmed a newspaper report which said two officers had improperly helped the 32-year-old Princess by pretending her brand new car was broken down so that it would not be immobilised by a parking patrol.

"They acted wrongly and have been advised accordingly by their duty inspector," a police spokeswoman said.

The incident made front-page news in the early editions of mail on Sunday under the headline "Diana: a law unto herself."

The estranged wife of heir-to-the-throne Prince Charles was unable to find a parking space for her new Audi Cabriolet near a London restaurant where she was lunching and turned to the passing policemen for help, the newspaper said.

The two officers put a police memo on the windscreen saying the vehicle had broken down and that its wheels should not be clamped pending payment of a fine, the usual penalty for unauthorised parking. The policemen have reprimanded but will face no further disciplinary action.



World's largest omelette!

TOKYO: A group of Japanese cooks claims to have made the world's largest omelette, using around 160,000 eggs, 1.8 tonnes of potatoes and 300kg (660 pounds) of milk, the Kyodo news agency reported on Sunday, says Reuter.

The cooks, specialists in Spanish cuisine, took three hours making the omelette, which was 15 metres (50 feet) long and 128 square metres (1,380 square feet) in area.

They used a 15-metre (50-foot) oval frying pan with a lid weighing 1.5 tonnes.

The cooks said the omelette, was slightly bigger than one cooked up in Belgium in 1990 and recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records.

Five thousand visitors watched the event and ate some of the omelette but portions for another 40,000 were left over, Kyodo reported.

Bullets instead of eggs

CAIRO: A security officer saw strange shapes inside three frozen chickens as they slid through a baggage metal detector Saturday at Cairo International Airport, reports AP.

The officer, Hanan Ezzat, investigated and found not golden eggs but bullets. Sixty of them, stashed inside the fowl accompanying Egyptian passenger Ahmed Ramadan on a flight to Greece.

Ramadan told authorities he was doing a favour for a woman who asked him to take the chickens to a relative in Athens.

The Egypt Air flight took off 30 minutes late, without Ramadan, who was detained, or the confiscated chickens.

US to reschedule military exercises with ROK

WASHINGTON, Mar 20: The Clinton administration decided Saturday to reschedule a joint military exercise with the Republic of Korea (ROK) forces in light of the latest snag on inspecting North Korea's nuclear facilities, an administration official said, reports AP.

The decision came at a three-hour meeting of President Clinton's top national security aides on how best to push North Korea toward "a resolution that doesn't end in conflict," said

the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Plans for the joint US-South Korean military exercise known as "Team Spirit" had been suspended to coax the North into allowing nuclear inspections.

But with the breakdown Saturday of talks between North and South Korea, the exercise "will be rescheduled" unless circumstances change over the weekend, the official said. "We will consult with South Korea on timing."



Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (L) hands a gift to a Bosnian refugee girl during a reception March 19. Bhutto distributed sweets and gifts to some 600 Afghan and Kashmiri children and 150 Bosnian teenagers at her official residence in Islamabad. — AFP photo

Fear of sex abuse allegations cools adult affection to kids

UNDATED, Mar 20: When the Rev Ron Wolf greets parishioners after Mass, sometimes a child will run up and give him a big hug. In more innocent times, it was the kind of loving gesture that made a priest's day, reports AP.

But these are not innocent times in the United States.

Now, a child's hug freezes Wolf with apprehension. Too many priests have been accused of sexual abuse, he says. Too many parents are suspicious of any affection shown to their kids.

"I have to be really, really

careful," said Wolf, pastor of St Thomas Aquinas, a Roman Catholic church near Albuquerque, NM.

"Sometimes the thought goes through my mind, 'I wonder who's watching? Who's taking a picture? I've never had any problems at all, but I'm not taking any chances.'"

He's got company. Priests, teachers, coaches, scoutmasters — people once considered pillars of any community, trusted as role models for children — now often find themselves under a cloud of suspicion.

Fear of sexual abuse allegations has prompted some adults to stop working with children altogether. Others try to protect themselves by withholding the physical affection shared freely in more trusting days.

"What you are seeing is sexual abuse hysteria," said Dr Richard Gardner, professor of child psychiatry at Columbia University. "People are running scared. You can't touch kids anymore."

It's not that young children no longer crave hugs, kisses, cuddles or pats on the back.

"Children need nurturing

touch," said Cordelia Anderson of Minneapolis, a lecturer on sexual health and violence prevention.

"But now, if you mention touch, people think about sexual abuse. Many adults are more worried about litigation and protecting themselves than giving children what they really need."

You can hardly blame them. If Americans once buried their heads in the sand about sexual abuse of children, a stream of gruesome headlines in recent years has made it seem as if exploitation is everywhere: Orgies at preschool,

Molesters behind the altar. Sex in the scoutmaster's tent.

The rate of reported abuse has risen sharply since the 1970s, but nobody knows for sure whether it's because abuse is increasing or because people are more aware of the problem.

One thing is certain: Nobody is immune from accusation.

Consider the case of Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, one of America's most visible Roman Catholic prelates and a leader in the church's struggle to rout priestly pedophilia.

In November, 34-year-old Steven Cook filed a \$10 million lawsuit accusing Bernardin and another priest of molesting him as a teen-ager.

Last month, the damage to his reputation already done, Bernardin was dropped from the lawsuit. Cook said he no longer trusted his hypnosis-recovered memories.

Bernardin's vindication produced little cheering among Catholic leaders. Scores of sex-abuse cases involving priests are still hanging; one estimate puts the church's cost of settling the scandals at more than 400 million dollars.

UK drafts key changes in HK constitution

HONG KONG, Mar 20: The British government has quietly drafted key changes to Hong Kong's constitution, even before the Legislative Council has had a chance to debate them, a Hong Kong press report said today, reports AFP.

The Sunday Morning Post said the Privy Council in London adopted changes to the letters patent last July — to limit the number of directly elected seats in the Legislature to 20.