

Rising water threat to existence of Maldives

NEW DELHI, Mar 23: Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom said today he was unsure of the existence of his nation if the sea continued to rise, reports AFP.

Gayoom, who is on a four-day official visit to India, said environmentalists were concerned over the survival of the low-lying Maldives islands because of rising waters in the Indian ocean and rapid land erosion.

"We only hope that in the next five to 10 years we will exist," Gayoom told a press conference.

"But at the moment we do not feel that we will disappear from the face of the earth in the next 10 years," he said, adding that there had been no significant rise lately in the ocean level.

The Maldives comprises 1,192 coral islands, but its population of some 200,000 people is scattered among 201

islands, most of which are only a few feet above sea level.

"Gayoom's worries on the fate of his nation followed a Maldives-sponsored operation in December to move people off an unspecified number of low-lying islands which had been threatened by extensive sea and land erosion.

Experts have also warned that one-sixth of Bangladesh could vanish under sea by the next century unless the disaster-prone nation of 120 million people takes urgent measures to curb soil erosion.

Gayoom also said he met with Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao in talks to further expand bilateral ties.

▲ The Maldives believed that India and Pakistan should evolve a "method" to resolve their bitter row over Kashmir, where a violent Muslim secessionist campaign has claimed more than 8,000 lives since 1989, Gayoom said.

US to help promote security in South Asia to control N-arms

WASHINGTON, Mar 23: Washington is planning an initiative to help promote security in South Asia, which could include controls on nuclear weapons and the sale of F-16 warplanes to Pakistan, a senior official said Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Undersecretary of State Lynn Davis said the proposal will be a focus of Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott's trip next month to India and Pakistan.

Davis told reporters at a breakfast meeting the US government had a number of proposals on the non-proliferation side to reduce tension in the Subcontinent.

She cited security reports that India and Pakistan, which have waged war against each other three times since 1947, had "the ability to move rather quickly to deploy nuclear

weapons" and were moving to deploy longer-range missiles.

The US will try to bring the two states into a proposed comprehensive treaty banning nuclear testing and into a proposed convention that would ban the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons.

In addition, it will seek to persuade India and Pakistan not to deploy longer range missiles and to join in a multi-lateral approach to security in South Asia that might also involve China and Japan, Davis said.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the plan is an administration recommendation that Congress grant a one-time exemption of a law that bans military aid to Pakistan to permit the sale of up to 38 F-16 fighters to Islamabad.

But she said this would re-

quire in return a commitment to "cap the production of fissile material by the Pakistanis and to do this in a verifiable way."

Washington would also want Pakistan's support for "both the overall conventions on the cut-off of fissile material as well as the comprehensive test ban treaty," she said.

Davis said the administration had abandoned its original goal of trying to repeal the law preventing such sales to Pakistan — called the Pressler Amendment — in favour of a one-time exemption.

Despite opposition from India and some arms control advocates, Davis said the administration had decided to go ahead with the proposal.

She stressed that the plane sale was an element in an overall approach toward South Asia, not an end in itself, and

would require congressional approval.

"We've already begun consultations with the Pakistan government as well as in parallel discussions" with the US congress on the initiative and Talbott will be "raising this to the senior levels" on his trip, Davis said.

The Pressler Amendment bans military aid to Pakistan unless the president can certify Islamabad neither has nuclear weapons nor is trying to develop them. The White House has been unable to make that certification for nearly four years.

A US official who spoke on condition of anonymity said the Clinton administration felt the United States had "gotten as much mileage as we could out of Pressler and now want use it to get some progress" on arms control.

Flight delays common feature in India

NEW DELHI, Mar 23: Long flight delays are a common feature of air travel in India but the four-hour wait experienced by passengers Tuesday on a Bombay-Delhi flight was unusual even by local standards, reports AFP.

About 50 passengers refused to board the Sahara India flight for more than four hours until an official from the Director-General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) came to the airport to certify that the aircraft was "safe".

Bombay Airport officials said the flight was initially delayed because the crew oxygen bottle was not full. Sahara India engineers secured a cylinder from another airline and passengers were told to board the plane.

But about 50 passengers refused to enter the aircraft until someone from the DGCA, the Civil Aviation Authority, inspected the plane and pronounced it safe.

The regional director for flight safety was rushed to the airport, declared the plane airworthy and it took off for New Delhi.

The flight arrived safely in New Delhi more than four hours behind schedule.

Nine people were killed on March 8 when a Sahara India plane crashed at the international airport here while on a training flight.

Thatcher resumes activities

SANTIAGO, Mar 23: Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher resumed her schedule of activities on Tuesday a day after fainting during a speech before Chilean business leaders, reports AFP.

The 68-year old Thatcher cancelled a breakfast at the Chilean-British Chamber of Commerce, but she was feeling much better, a spokesman said.

BRIEFLY

Hrawi okays death penalty: Lebanese President Elias Hrawi signed a law introducing the death penalty for politically motivated killings and making it mandatory for pre-mediated murder, Reuters reports from Beirut.

Parliament rushed through the law on March 10 after the February 27 bombing of a Maronite church which killed 11 worshippers and injured nearly 60, arousing fears for Lebanon's political stability.

The law closes legal loopholes that allowed judges to avoid imposing capital punishment for murder since 1982. It is part of a crackdown on violent crime that has been rampant since the 1975-90 civil war.

Togo assembly sworn in: A new Togo assembly with a majority opposed to President Gnassingbe Eyadema was sworn in in Lome on Tuesday, in what is formally the last act of the country's transition to democracy, AFP reports from Lome.

Although the Prime Minister has not been named, observers said he would be one of Eyadema's opponents, as 43 of the 81 MPs are opposed to the president.

Eyadema himself has been in power since 1967, with a mandate which was renewed last August. Although the assembly has the power to dismiss the government, it can itself be dissolved by the head of state.

7 HR activists held in Turkey: Seven human rights activists were taken under police custody Tuesday in Turkey's troubled Kurdish-dominated southeastern region, a British embassy official said Wednesday, AP reports from Ankara.

Three of the foreigners were British, according to the embassy. Three of the others were from Ireland and one was from New Zealand. None were identified.

"They were held by police for their own protection," said the British embassy official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Quake hits Mexico: A moderate earthquake struck near this port city Tuesday, shaking buildings as far north as San Diego, AP reports from Ensenada, Mexico.

A police spokesman said they had not received reports of damage or injuries.

The earthquake was 5.3 in magnitude and centered 33 miles (53 kms) east of Ensenada, and was followed 10 minutes later by a 3.6 quake in the same area, a spokesman from the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, California, said.

Arrest of Iranian writer protested: A human rights group issued a protest Tuesday over the detention of Iranian dissident writer Ali Akbar Saidi-Sirjani, saying the move could signal a further crackdown on civil liberties by the Islamic regime, AFP reports from New York.

Human rights Watch/Middle East said there has been no official confirmation of the writer's arrest, but said police agents raided his house and interrogated his wife for more than 24 hours last week. Saidi-Sirjani has not been seen since March 14.

"The arrest of Saidi-Sirjani, one of Iran's most prolific contemporary writers, marks a further narrowing of the scope of expression in the Islamic republic, and may foreshadow a crackdown on other writers and artists whose views differ from the hard-line orthodoxy promoted by spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei," the organisation said.

Cartoon artist Lantz dies: Walter Lantz, the cartoon artist who created Woody Woodpecker in the 1940s, died Tuesday at the age of 93, AFP reports from Los Angeles.

Lantz conceived of the Audacious Bird character after a Woodpecker disrupted his honeymoon. His wife, Gracie, suggested the cartoon character and gave the bird its trademark contemptuous laugh.

Other cartoon characters created by Lantz included Andy Panda, Chilly Willy, Smedley, Sugarfoot, Charley Beary and Oswald Rabbit. He produced the first technicolour cartoon in 1930, a five-minute opening sequence of "The King of Jazz."

Algerian papers protest violence: Algerian newspapers published blank front pages on Tuesday to protest against political violence by Muslim militants, the Algerian news agency APS reported, Reuters says from Paris.

APS monitored in Paris said all Algerian newspapers took the action to support a strike called by Algeria's UGTA labour union for Tuesday.

The UGTA (Union Generale Des Travailleurs Algeriens) called for a strike "in all public and private enterprises to denounce violence and terrorism."

2 Frenchmen killed in Algiers: Two French citizens, a father and his son, were killed in a suburb of Algiers, Algerian security officers said yesterday, AFP reports from Algiers.

The murders took place Tuesday evening in the southern Algiers district of Birkhadem, they said identifying the two as Roger-Michel Drouaire and his son Pascal Velery.

Curfew imposed near Khmer HQs

BATTAMBANG, Cambodia, Mar 23: An 8pm to dawn curfew has been imposed in this provincial capital, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) from the fallen Khmer Rouge headquarters of Pailin, reports AP.

Military police patrolled the city streets as the curfew began Tuesday.

The government captured Pailin last Saturday but fear hit-and-run retaliation by the guerrillas.

The Khmer Rouge radio had been silent since Saturday but resumed broadcasting Tuesday night.



American soldiers wait on their APC to embark on US ships at Mogadishu harbour on Tuesday before leaving Somalia definitively. The final contingent of US troops is scheduled to depart Friday. — AFP photo

PLO, Israel close to accord on Palestinian security

CAIRO, Mar 23: The PLO and Israel are moving toward an agreement on Palestinian security in the occupied territories that will enable a resumption in autonomy talks, a senior PLO official disclosed here late Tuesday, reports AFP.

Nabil Shaath, who headed a Palestinian delegation at discussions with Israeli officials on Sunday and Monday in Tunis, said the PLO was banking on again here on Thursday.

Earlier reports from both Tunis and Israel had said the security talks would resume in Cairo on Wednesday.

"We can't say we got all that we wanted," Shaath said of the Tunis meetings, "but we are on the way toward an opening that will allow for a resumption in the (autonomy) talks and the protection of the Palestinians."

He added that Israeli and PLO delegates would "probably" confer again here on Thursday at a meeting of 22 countries that are to finance a Palestinian police force for autonomous Palestinian areas of the Israeli-held territories.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on Tuesday turned down a proposal to deploy armed United Nations observers in Hebron, Israeli television reported.

The offer had been presented to him by negotiators returning from the meetings in Tunis, according to the television report.

Diplomats in Tunis said PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat had agreed to a Norwegian proposal for up to 500 lightly armed foreign observers to be deployed in Hebron and 2,000 more in the Gaza Strip and

West Bank town of Jericho. Under terms of the September agreement, self-rule is to be implemented first in Gaza and Jericho.

US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross meanwhile expressed optimism here Tuesday that the PLO and Israel would soon resume negotiations to launch Palestinian self-rule.

"I think they are approaching very seriously" an accord on security measures, said Ross, who met Arafat earlier this week in Tunis.

"We had very productive discussions with Chairman Arafat. I think also the discussions that the chairman had with the Israelis were productive," he added.

Arafat conferred in Tunis with Israeli Foreign Ministry Director General Uri Savir.



A Kurdish demonstrator runs over the motorway A 3 near Cologne in Germany after setting himself ablaze during demonstrations against German and Turkish authorities on Tuesday. Firefighters extinguished the flames and evacuated the man to hospital. — AFP photo

China-Kuwait security pact soon

KUWAIT CITY, Mar 23: Kuwait, seeking to boost defences since the 1990 Iraqi invasion, is close to signing a security accord with China, Defence Minister Ali Salem Al-Sabah said Tuesday, reports AFP.

Sheikh Ali told journalists covering parliament that he would travel to Beijing at a later date to sign the accord aimed at helping "safeguard Kuwait's security."

He said the pact "will not necessarily be analogous to the four other defence accords Kuwait has concluded" with the United States, Britain, France and Russia after its liberation from Iraqi occupation in February 1991.

These four countries, along with China, form the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Pan Am bombing: Libya wants trial of suspects at World Court

PARIS, Mar 23: Libya is willing to let the two Libyan suspects in the Lockerbie airliner bombing be tried at the World Court with Scottish judges taking part in the proceedings, a Libyan lawmaker said here Tuesday, reports AFP.

Saad Mujber, Foreign Affairs Secretary of the Libyan Parliament, said Tripoli had agreed that the trial could take place at the International Court of Justice in the Dutch capital.

Speaking at UNESCO headquarters here at an inter-parliamentary conference, he said the proposal had been made by a Scottish legal expert. "I declare to you, and through you to the world, that we officially accept this proposal," Mujber said.

Libya has consistently refused to turn the suspects over for trial in Britain or the United States.

China needs US as counterweight to India?

WASHINGTON, Mar 23: China needs the US to some extent as a counterweight to India, says former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, reports PTI.

He suggests this in his new book "Diplomacy," from which extracts have been published by "Time" magazine.

After saying that in the next century China's "political and military shadow will fall over Asia and will affect the calculations of the other powers," he goes on to argue: "China welcomes US involvement in Asia as a counterweight to its feared neighbours, Japan, Russia and, to a lesser degree, India."

Judging by the extracts, Kissinger's basic argument is that the US must temper its idealism with a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy. In his own words, "a gap is threatening to open up in America's policy between its pretensions and its willingness to support them."

Off the Record

Mrs Schindler goes into hiding

BUENOS AIRES, Mar 23: Emilie Schindler, 86-year-old widow of the hero in Steven Spielberg's movie that swept the US Academy Awards, was in hiding Tuesday to elude swarms of reporters seeking her reaction, says Reuters.

"She likes all this attention but she's tired," said a man who identified himself as Leadro, an assistant to Mrs Schindler, who answered the telephone at her little house outside Buenos Aires.

"She's taken a couple of days off. She left yesterday and she's staying with friends," he added. He said there had been at least a couple of dozen calls Tuesday morning after "Schindler's List" won Oscars for best picture and six other categories Monday night.

Oskar Schindler and his wife settled in Argentina after he saved the lives of more than 1,000 Polish Jews during World War II. He eventually returned to Germany and died two decades ago. She stayed behind in Argentina, supported by Jewish organisations.

Monk jailed for having sex

BANGKOK: The Supreme Court has upheld a ruling that a Buddhist abbot be jailed for three years for perjury and defrocked for having sex with a woman, reports AP.

The Supreme Court ruled Monday that a videotape proved that the monk was not forced to have sex with the woman as he had maintained.

The monk, Phrakru Phitak Kwanjit, now 70, had sex with the woman in 1988. He had told the Criminal Court that the woman forced him into sex at gunpoint so she could blackmail him. The woman, Nantawan Boontham, now 25, said the monk gave her tranquillisers and had sex with her after she passed out.

Nantawan said that when she regained consciousness, the monk told her that if she did not go to the police, he would buy her a house and car. She said they had sex several times after that, but he bought her nothing, so she got another monk to help her videotape their lovemaking.

The Criminal Court found the monk guilty but the Appeals Court overturned its ruling in 1992. Nantawan then brought the case to the Supreme Court.

Making headlines the past several weeks has been the saga of a popular preacher, Phra Yantra Ammorobhikkhu, who has been accused of having had liaisons with several women and fathering a child with one of them.

Masked men terrify chimpanzee

COLOMBO: Three young men who wore monkey masks and terrified the real chimpanzees at Sri Lanka's main zoo were locked up by local police and later freed on bail, a local press report said Tuesday, says AFP.

The three men had tried to ape the chimpanzees outside the Monkey's cage at Dehiwala Zoo, causing the creatures to panic, the Sinhalese language Lankadeepa said.

The men were taken into custody together with their masks but were freed by court Monday on bail equivalent to 30 dollars — and a warning not to monkey around in public places in the future.

US proposes expansion of Security Council

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 23: The United States on Tuesday proposed that the UN Security Council be enlarged to 20 members and repeated its call for permanent seats for Germany and Japan, reports Reuters.

US envoy Karl Inderfurth, addressing a General Assembly committee, disclosed for the first time that Washington backed nations advocating 20 seats on the 15-member council.

A change in the structure of the council, responsible for peace and security and empowered to impose mandatory decisions, is expected sometime during the 50th anniversary of the United Nations next year.

But Inderfurth did not touch on the veto power of permanent council members, now restricted to the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France.

While most UN members have advocated an enlargement of the council, they differ on whether the veto should remain as is or be shared among a larger group.

The Security Council currently has 15 members. Five are permanent members with veto power and the other 10 rotate for two year terms according to region.

"We believe that an increase in the overall size of the Security Council is warranted," Inderfurth said. "At this stage we find the number 20, suggested by others, a sound basis for further discussion."

"As we have already said, we believe one necessary enhancement is the addition of Japan and Germany to permanent membership, he said.

Inderfurth also said that non-permanent members should be allowed to succeed themselves when their two year term has expired, a procedure currently banned under the UN charter.

Malaysia won't oppose India's entry into ARF on security

SINGAPORE, Mar 23: Malaysia Yesterday said it would not rule out India's eventual participation in an expanded forum for discussing security concerns in the Asia-Pacific Region, reports AFP.

Foreign Minister Abdullah Badawi said that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was "not closing its mind" to the possibility of admitting more countries to the 18-member ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on security.

"Anything can happen in terms of the future..." but I

would not want at the moment to flag new members. I think it is too premature to even make suggestions that we want more countries to participate," he said.

The ARF is scheduled to hold its first formal meeting in Bangkok on July 25 immediately after the annual talks between the six ASEAN Foreign Ministers from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

The ARF was launched here last year when the ASEAN ministers for the first time

joined their counterparts from countries like the United States, Russia, China and Japan for informal talks on Asia-Pacific security.

The ARF's other founder members are Canada, South Korea, the European Union, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam and Laos.

Abdullah, speaking at the end of a two-day official visit, said he discussed the ASEAN meetings with his Singapore counterpart, Shumugam Jayakumar, and like Singapore felt it would be better to keep contentious issues out of the

ARF's first agenda.

"I would prefer that for first meeting we emphasise common areas. There are lots of things we can discuss instead of bringing in contentious issues right from the start," he said.

But, he said, there was no move to bar sensitive issues, adding: "I don't think we will have difficulty handling such issues if they are raised."

Abdullah said that except for Russia, China, Vietnam and Laos, all other members of ARF had already been discussing security issues during the ASEAN dialogue with the

group's major trading partners.

"This is not going to be a meeting of strangers and while we want to emphasise common problems and issues of common interest, I will not rule out the probability of sensitive issues being raised," he said.

Jayakumar told parliament recently that ASEAN should avoid controversial bilateral issues at the first ARF session.

Singapore wanted to see the "unique" body build confidence among its 18 members first, he said.

6 European states eligible for US military aid

WASHINGTON, Mar 23: President Bill Clinton announced Tuesday that six European nations were eligible for US military aid in the form of training and equipment, reports AFP.

The possible recipients are three Baltic nations — Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — and three east bloc nations — Albania, Bulgaria and Romania.

The six countries are part of the 10-nation "partnership for peace," a formulation adopted by the NATO.