

Russia set for major boom in arms sale

MOSCOW, Mar 30: Russia is set for a major boom in arms sales which could reach 20 billion dollars in 1994, a 10-fold increase from the figure last year, the head of state-owned military enterprise forecast today, reports AFP.

Viktor Samoilov, director of the Rosvoruzhonye company, said that Moscow was prepared to do business with former Soviet partners including those in the Middle East, India, China Africa and Eastern Europe.

Russia has not lost the markets previously developed by the former Soviet Union, he added.

Samoilov said that there had recently been a drop in arms sales because Moscow refused to grant credit to weapons buyers and was insisting on full payment.

Under the former Soviet regime, Moscow traded arms based on ideological principles and client states were given easy conditions for payment that included barter deals.

AP adds: Flight recorders show that the pilots of a Russian jetliner were still alive when their plane crashed into a snowy slope Siberia, killing all 75 people on board, the Izvestia newspaper said Wednesday.

The discovery discredits airlines officials' initial theories that there was a mid-air explosion or that the pilots died when the A-310 Airbus suddenly lost cabin pressure at high altitude, Izvestia said.

The newspaper said Russian experts are still preparing a full transcript of the conversations on the flight recorder.

The Russian International Airlines plane went down March 22 in a remote area of Prigovorok work camps near the Mongolian border, about four hours into a 10-hour flight from Moscow to Hong Kong.

Witnesses said they hear a loud noise, looked up and saw a plane trailing smoke. The plane maneuvered briefly, then exploded, apparently on impact, reports said.

The crash in the Altai Mountains near Mezhdurechensk, 3,200 kilometers (2,000 miles) east of Moscow, drew unwanted attention to Russia's poor air safety record. There were 11 air crashes in Russia in 1993, killing 221 people.

Heavy fighting around Muslim enclaves Serbs, Croats sign truce accord

ZAGREB, Croatia, Mar 30: Croatian officials and leaders of the country's rebel Serb minority signed a cease-fire agreement early Wednesday that is considered crucial to securing an overall peace in the Balkans, reports AP.

The cease-fire is to take effect at 9 am (0700 GMT) on April 4.

It marks the formal end of the six-month Croatian war of 1991, a Serb-Croat conflict which swiftly touched off much greater destruction in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Russian special envoy to former Yugoslavia, Vitaly Churkin, hailed the agreement as "only a beginning of the road toward peace and normalization of relations between Serbs and Croats."

That is vital to any lasting peaceful solution in the Balkans. A Muslim-Croat federation agreement in Bosnia and a related accord to form a confederation with Croatia have ended Muslim-Croat fighting in Bosnia. But that agreement depends on settling the situation in Croatia.

The cease-fire agreement was signed after nearly 18 hours of arduous negotiations, and an unsuccessful round of talks a week ago.

The most difficult aspect of the talks was agreement on 34 maps defining control of territory and withdrawal of troops and heavy weapons from the confrontation lines.

"We are satisfied because this agreement is a step toward normalization of relations on Croatian territory," said Hrvoje Sarinic, the head of the Croatian government delegation. "We are convinced this agreement will be respected."

"With the Bosnian federation and confederation agreement, plus this agreement, the atmosphere of war has been turned to an atmosphere of peace," Saranic said.

US Ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith, who also participated in the talks, said the cease-fire was only a preliminary step toward normalizing relations between the two most important peoples in the former Yugoslavia.

He said the two sides had to move swiftly on to economic cooperation and political issues, which will be the most difficult to resolve. Croatian Serbs have refused to submit to rule from Zagreb.

Bosnian radio said by Wednesday noon eight people had been killed and 26 wounded in heavy shelling. Among the dead was a 10-year-old girl, and there were other children killed and wounded, it said.

The fighting started Tuesday, UN spokesman Maj Rob Annink said, quoting UN observers.

The Bosnian Serb news agency SRNA said one Serb soldier was killed and four wounded in clashes south of Gorazde. It blamed the fighting on government forces putting pressure on the front lines.

Annink also reported continued heavy fighting in the Bihac area. SRNA reported three Serb soldiers were killed near Bihac. Bosnian radio said two government troops were killed in combat with forces of a rebellious local Muslim leader, Fikret Abdic.

The attack appeared to be a

response to a weekend offensive in north-central Bosnia where the Muslim-led government claimed to have gained ground against the Serbs.

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NLD wants talks with Myanmar junta

YANGON, Mar 30: The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) made a veiled call Tuesday for a dialogue with Myanmar's ruling military, observers here said, reports AFP.

The NLD's approach came in a reference to a changing internal situation which called for "a solution through face-to-face talks" between the government and "all" organisations currently involved in the constitutional convention.

Submitting an 80-page position paper on the state, its structure and the head of state to the convention, the NLD said the time was ripe for such a dialogue.

But the NLD paper reiterated that all state bodies should be formed from popular elections held according to democratic practices.

Observers said this constituted rejection of the military's insistence that a guaranteed role for the military should be enshrined in the constitution.

The NLD's former Secretary General, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest since July 1989, has also

called for dialogue.

The NLD, which won national elections in 1990 but was unable to take power when the military objected, also said that ongoing talks between the government and armed ethnic groups in the border areas offered "good prospects for internal peace."

AP adds: Nations should engage in dialogue with military-ruled Myanmar because the policy of isolating it does not work. Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said Tuesday.

Goh spoke with reporters on the final day of a visit that helped lift some of Myanmar's international isolation. He was the first leader of a non-Communist nation to visit Myanmar since its soldiers suppressed a pro-democracy movement in 1988.

The United States and other Western countries have curtailed aid and contacts with Myanmar since 1988. Singapore and its allies in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations say contacts are needed to bring change to Myanmar.

BRIEFLY

Iran to help end Afghan war: Iran, said on Tuesday it was ready to resume mediation to end the civil war in Afghanistan and help achieve reconciliation. Reuters reports from Nicosia.

Iran's news agency IRNA quoted Foreign Ministry spokesman Mahmoud Mohammadi as saying Iran was "ready to continue its peace efforts as before to help bring the belligerent parties to the negotiation table."

Iran had previously mediated but fighting erupted in Kabul again on New Year's Day.

Fire engulfs an Indian park: A forest fire raging in India's Simlipal National Park is threatening wildlife including tigers, leopards and elephants, local news agencies said on Tuesday, Reuters reports from New Delhi.

They quoted Adwait Singh, Environment Minister of Orissa, as saying the blaze had engulfed about one-tenth of the 2,200-square-KM (850-square-mile) park, about 250 KM (150 miles) southwest of Calcutta.

Singh said the fire, possibly started by local tribes looking for firewood and made worse by scorching weather, had been burning for about two weeks.



A Spanish UNPROFOR soldier based in Medjugorje guards a road a few kilometres north of Mostar on Tuesday, next to an inscription reading: "Long Live Tito's Yugoslavia." — AFP photo

Thai navy to buy plane from US: Thailand's cabinet has given the navy permission to buy its first jet aircraft — 18 A-7 Corsairs — from the United States for just over two billion baht (80 million dollars), a government spokesman said yesterday, AFP reports from Bangkok.

But the cabinet turned down navy requests to buy two frigates worth more than three billion baht (120 million dollars), six helicopters priced at one billion baht (40 million dollars), and to build a dockyard in southeastern Chon Buri province costing two billion baht (80 million dollars), the official said.

The navy was told a supply more details to the Finance Ministry before resubmitting the rejected requests to the cabinet, he said.

Huge gas explosion in France

COURBEVOIE, France, Mar 30: A heating plant explosion that rocked western Paris early Wednesday injured 59 people, many of them African immigrants, broke windows over a wide area and damaged the Great Arch at the nearby office complex known as La Defense, reports AP.

A workman at the plant was missing and feared dead, authorities said.

An engineer at the plant said the blast, which sparked a fierce fire, was likely caused by a gas leak.

The blast occurred about 1:30 am in this industrial suburb on the northwest outskirts of Paris and could be heard through much of the capital. Most of the injured were immigrants living in a nearby shelter for low-income families.

Officials said 59 people were treated at hospitals, including three in serious condition. Dozens of others suffered from commotion or light injuries.

One of the most badly hurt victims was a 10-year-old girl, officials said. She was revived with heart massage before being rushed to a hospital.

At daybreak, searchers were trying to find a missing maintenance worker at the ruined plant, while police investigators arrived to try to determine the cause of the explosion.

Hundreds of offices in La Defense, an ultra-modern complex just west of Paris, were without water, heat and air conditioning.

The damaged plant, run by a company called Climadef, provides heating and other services to several municipalities in the area.

A plant engineer, Jacques Menissier, told French radio the blast was likely caused by a high-pressure gas leak.

The explosion that rattled the area like an earthquake damaged the south pillar of the Grand Arch, which stands like a gateway to the district, in a direct line with the Arch of Triumph in Paris. The Grand Arch, an enormous cube containing offices, was among several architectural projects of President Francois Mitterrand.

The Housing Ministry, which has its offices in the Arch, said the explosion damaged window casings up to the 33rd floor.

The Arch was closed off for a security check, meaning thousands of workers at the Housing Ministry and the Tourism and Transport Ministry, also located there, were unable to report for work.

Army camp blast in Kashmir: Probe begins

SRINAGAR, Mar 30: The Indian army began an investigation on Wednesday into a blast that ripped through an army camp in violence-torn Kashmir and killed at least 13 soldiers, including a major-general, reports Reuters.

An army spokesman said a preliminary examination of the site of the blast at the Badambagh base in Srinagar suggested the explosion was an accident, but that no one was ruling out sabotage at this stage.

He said the blast occurred while officers were inspecting weapons and explosives captured from Muslim separatists fighting a bloody war against Indian rule of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Kashmiri police said their information suggested 16 people were killed, including an unidentified woman.

Off the Record

Antibodies to kill AIDS

STOCKHOLM: A Swedish researcher says he has discovered antibodies that can kill all types of the AIDS virus, and believes an effective vaccine is possible within 10 years. Swedish news reports said Tuesday, according to Reuters.

"We have found the key that fits all locks," Sigvard Olofsson, professor at Gothenburg University, told the newspaper Expressen.

Professor Luc Montagnier, the Frenchman who discovered HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, said this month vaccine research had reached a dead end. He said vaccines tested so far on volunteers were successful against only one of the hundreds of strains of HIV.

Olofsson said that, working with Danish researchers, he had found a so-called TN-antigen that was effective against all strains of the HIV virus. Antigens are substances that stimulate the production of antibodies.

Zedillo to run for president: Mexico's ruling party said Tuesday it has chosen US trained economist Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon as its candidate for president after its earlier candidate was assassinated last week, Reuters reports from Mexico City.

Zedillo, a Yale-educated economist who was former Education Minister, had run the election campaign of Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, who was shot dead last Wednesday by a gunman in the northern city of Tijuana.

Zedillo, 42, is a strong supporter of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's free-market economic policies. The Mexican stock market rallied earlier on strong rumours that Zedillo would be named the PRI candidate for the August elections.

Patriot missiles on way to ROK

WASHINGTON, Mar 30: The United States started Patriot defence missiles on their way to South Korea, but no other equipment is being sent and there is "no imminent crisis," the Defence Department said Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Department spokesman Dennis Boax said the Patriot missiles were being carried by train to Oakland, California, where they will be sent to South Korea.

Boax said US-South Korean consultations continue on other preparations in case of war over North Korea's nuclear programme but added the Pentagon believes there is no immediate threat of war.

"There is no imminent threat, there is no imminent crisis," Boax said "we're proceeding with prudence in what we plan."

He said he had not seen a report in South Korean newspapers last week that a Chinese businessman had said North Korean people were being told to prepare for war.

President Clinton said the Patriot missiles being sent to South Korea will be defensive. North Korea has called them weapons of aggression.

The United States and South Korea are also consulting on going ahead with joint war exercises because of what they call North Korea's refusal to allow adequate international inspection of its nuclear facilities.

Defence Secretary William Perry said last week that the United States may send more troops and military equipment to South Korea, but Boax said no decisions to do so have been made.

South Korean President Kim Young-Sam said in Beijing on Tuesday that he hoped intensive negotiations would resolve the impasse in Korea and said the United States, Japan and Russia were trying to find a solution.

Meanwhile, the United States on Tuesday assured North Korea "the door is open to new high level talks, but only if two previously agreed upon conditions, including UN inspections of Pyongyang's nuclear sites, are met."

"Our willingness to proceed to a third round of high-level US-North Korea talks depends on successful completion of IAEA inspections and the exchange of envoys on the North-South denuclearisation issue," State Department spokesman Mike McCurry told reporters.

"Those conditions not having been satisfied, we're not in a position to proceed to a third round... so the door is open to a third round should those other two items be satisfied," he said.

Jewish memorial plaque for Hebron victims

WASHINGTON, Mar 30: A coalition of American Jewish groups March 29 offered the people of Hebron a plaque in memory of the Palestinians killed by a Jewish settler there last month, reports USIS.

"We are sending the plaque to tell the people of Hebron that we share in their profound shock and grief over the Hebron mosque massacre; that we join them in their sorrow and that our hearts are with them in their time of mourning," the coalition said in a statement.

The plaque is dedicated to the people of Hebron in memory of those Palestinians massacred February 25, 1994. Hassan Abdul Rahman, the PLO representative in Washington, accepted the plaque in a ceremony held at the Palestine Affairs Center in Washington, DC.

Human proteins in pigs

LONDON: Cambridge University researchers breeding pigs with human genes for organ transplants said Tuesday the first could be ready for clinical human trials in two years, reports AFP.

Increasingly refined methods of introducing human DNA into pigs — the key to preventing organ rejection — has resulted in a herd of more than 40 transgenic pigs, immunologist David White told a press conference.

He said the birth of a second generation of transgenic pigs has shown that transplanted human genes are transmitted through normal reproduction, and that a large herd of organ donor animals could eventually be bred.

"Now, having been able to create human proteins in the pigs, the patient's immune system should not reject the pig's organ," he said. "We could have the first transplants within two years."

"We can now get exactly the same response from the pigs as we would from a human being," he said. "The problem with this type of transplant has always been almost immediate rejection of the organ by the patient."



Cambridge immunologist John White (R) and heart surgeon John Wallwork, who are developing pigs destined to provide human transplant organs, show photos of prospective donor animals during a press conference on their work on Tuesday. — AFP photo

Pakistan agrees to extradite Egyptian militants

CAIRO, Mar 30: Egypt and Pakistan agreed on Tuesday on the text of an extradition treaty which would allow Islamabad to extradite Muslim militants wanted by the Egyptian government for masterminding violent attacks to overthrow it, reports Reuters.

The embassy of Pakistan said in a statement that the justice ministers of the two countries also agreed at a meeting in Cairo to cooperate against terrorism, drugs and arms trafficking.

The statement said the extradition treaty would be signed in Islamabad.

State of emergency in South Africa's Natal province soon

DURBAN, Mar 30: South Africa's transitional authority is to declare a state of emergency in troubled Natal province, a move likely to complicate a planned summit on the country's growing crisis, reports Reuters.

The transitional executive council, comprising the government, the African National Congress (ANC) and smaller parties, decided on Tuesday to impose emergency measures as soon as possible to ensure that South Africa's first all-race elections next month go ahead in the province.

The Inkatha Freedom Party of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who wants the election, to be postponed until his constitutional demands have been met, reacted with anger to the council's decision.

"That is such serious matter that it deserves cabinet consideration, it is a hell of a serious matter," senior Inkatha member Ben Ngubane told Reuters.

South Africa's independent electoral commission has reported that free and fair elections would not be possible in Natal and the neighbouring black Kwazulu homeland if the current violence continues.

Kwazulu Cabinet Minister Frank Mdalose said the council was out to destroy the homeland government, which is led by Buthelezi.

"I know they have been extremely keen for a long time to exterminate it. They want to destroy Kwazulu and the Zulu people, he said.

The Natal Kwazulu region, heartland of the country's nine million Zulus who are split between Inkatha and the ANC, has seen more than 170 people killed in political violence in the last 11 days.

The council announced its decision of emergency measures shortly after the government said an on-off summit between the country's top four leaders had been agreed for next week.

It said president F.W. de Klerk, Buthelezi, ANC leader Nelson Mandela and Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini had agreed on a venue but not an exact date.

The summit was originally set for Wednesday.

AP adds: The government and the ANC prepared on Tuesday to send troops to the volatile Zulu-dominated Natal province in case a special peace summit, postponed to next week, fails to quell political violence.

A day after 53 people died in fierce clashes in and around Johannesburg linked to Zulu nationalists' opposition to the April election, tensions showed no signs of subsiding.

Unidentified gunmen fired at the African National Congress headquarters, where ANC security guards Monday killed nine Zulu marchers.

No one was injured in Tuesday's shootout, but the clash underscored the volatile situation as Zulu nationalists step up their opposition to the April 26-28 election, which is expected to bring the ANC to power.

In the Soweto township outside Johannesburg, ANC supporters and rival Zulus fought running battles outside a hotel, and at least one person was taken to hospital with gunshot wounds, eyewitnesses said.

Clashes in Soweto's Dube district followed fighting Monday in which five people died, police said. The dead were identified as ANC followers.

The leader of the Zulu-dominated Inkatha Freedom Party meanwhile rejected plans for an emergency summit this week with the government and ANC.

Mangosuthu Buthelezi described Monday's bloodshed as the beginning of a final struggle to the finish between the ANC and the Zulu nation.

Earlier, his nephew, Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, also rejected an invitation to peace talks with ANC President Nelson Mandela and president F.W. de Klerk, saying his people needed time to bury their dead and allow their anger over Monday's shootings to subside.

The cabinet noted that the film deals with the atrocities of the Nazis against the Jews in Krakow, Poland, during the World War II," he said in a statement.

Malaysia lifts ban on Schindler's List

KUALA LUMPUR, Mar 30: Malaysia today lifted its widely-criticised ban on the Oscar-winning Holocaust film "Schindler's List," reports Reuters.

Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said the weekly cabinet meeting on Wednesday agreed to allow the film's screening in accordance with normal guidelines.

"The cabinet noted that the film deals with the atrocities of the Nazis against the Jews in Krakow, Poland, during the World War II," he said in a statement.