BRIEFLY

Pope cancels trip to Lebanon: The Vatican said Monday that Pope John Paul II has decided to indefinitely postpone his trip to Lebanon, where recent violence has made security for such a visit difficult, AP reports from Vatican City.

"The Holy Pontiff has expressed the hope that this decision, taken with sadness, is understood by all," Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro said.

Although the Vatican had never announced a date for the trip, it was widely expected that the Pope was going at the end of May. But last week the Vatican indicated that the trip was being reconsidered.

Saddam pardons 4 Romanians: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein pardoned yesterday four Romanians imprisoned for "illegal entry" into Iraq after an appeal from his Romanian counterpart, the Foreign Ministry said, AFP reports from Bucharest.

The four, held in a prison near Baghdad after being jailed for entering Iraq from Turkey, were released following the intervention of Romanian President Ion Iliescu, the ministry said.

The Romanians are expected to return home via Jordan on Wednesday, the statement added.

Train mishap claims 3 in India: A freight train slammed into a suburban train at a station in the western Indian district of Nasik, killing three commuters and injuring 20, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported yesterday, AFP says from New Delhi.

Railway workers using cranes were clearing wreckage left by the accident which occurred late Sunday when the coal freighter changed tracks and rammed into the passenger train, the news agency said.

The impact hurled several passenger coaches on to the railway station platform, including one which struck a commuter waiting room.

China releases 3 dissidents: The three Chinese dissidents detained Friday and Saturday during the visit of French Prime Minister Edouard Balladur were released Sunday, the dissidents said yesterday AFP reports from Beijing.

Bao Ge, Wang Funcheng and Yang Zhou were able to return home Sunday, but were placed under house arrest for most of the day and their telephones were cut until this morning so that they could speak with the press, the dissidents said.

They were released after the departure Sunday of Balladur from Shanghai, they added.

ASEAN police chiefs meet in May: A meeting of ASEAN police chiefs will be held in Phuket of North Thailand from May 1 to 5 to discuss police cooperation including information exchange on the discovery of a bomb near the Israeli Embassy here on March 11, Xinhua reports from Bangkok.

Foreign affairs division commander Pol Maj-Gen Issarapan Sanitwong Na Ayutthaya was quoted by local press as saying on Sunday that the police chiefs of Singapore, Malaysia the Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei would attend the meeting.

Terrorism will be a special topic at the meeting, in particular the truck bomb which was believed to be meant for the Israeli mission in Bangkok.

2 killed in Mexican plane crash: Two people were killed when a light plane crashed into a donkey on a remote airstrip in the northern state of Chihuahua, the government news agency Notimex reported Sunday, Reuter says from Mexico City.

The pilot of the plane tried to avoid the animal but failed and then crashed into some trees, Notimex quoted local police as saying. The pilot and one passenger died.

A model wears a burgundy ribbed double breasted jacket and black velvet shorts during the Troa Cho Fall '94 fashion collection on Sunday. Cho is the leading designer of Seoul, Korea. — AFP photo

Yeltsin objects to bombing without Russian approval

US threatens to take tougher measures on Serbs

WASHINGTON, Apr 11: President Clinton is warning that US air strikes against Bosnian Serb positions will be followed by more tough measures unless the Serbs lay down their arms, reports AP.

"We have seen in the past that when we have been firm in support of the United Nations mission that it has tended to further negotiations. That's all we are trying to do," Clinton said Sunday after two US jets under NATO command bombed Serbian positions outside the besieged Muslim enclave of Gorazde.

It was the first time NATO has launched an air strike against ground targets during the two-year civil war in Bosnia. In February, NATO warplanes, downed four Bosnian Serb aircraft violating the "no-fly" zone, but that action did not require the request of UN commanders on the ground.

Last month, a UN appeal for air support proved futile when it took four hours for the request to go through the chain of command, allowing the Serbian attackers to escape. This time, the UN said, the mission was approved in 25 minutes.

"It all happened in fairly rapid succession," Clinton said. "There was not a long time delay. ... We've been keeping on top of this."

"We said we would act if we were requested to do so," Clinton told reporters on the White House lawn. "We have now done so and will do so again if we are requested."

Defence Secretary William Perry said in a statement that two F-16C aircraft, based in Aviano, Italy, dropped three 500-pound (225-kilogram) bombs. He said the bombing was ordered after UN military observers in Gorazde came under attack from Serb artillery and asked for NATO air protection.

"We believe that was an appropriate and effective use of NATO air power, and are prepared to use it again," he said.

Reuter reports from Moscow: Russian president Boris Yeltsin complained today that the United States had not consulted Moscow before Sunday's NATO air attack on Bosnian Serb forces.

In comments to reporters at Moscow airport, Yeltsin said he had stressed this in a telephone conversation with president Bill Clinton early today. He also said the Kremlin wanted a UN security council debate on the air attack.

Yeltsin, speaking before leaving for a three-day visit to Spain, said Clinton had failed to answer when asked whether the raid had the prior approval of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

It was essential to clarify what targets had been hit and whether there were any civilian casualties, he said.

A child rides on her father's shoulders during a massive demonstration in the ancient Byzantine capital on Sunday against United Nations inaction in the Serbian assault on the UN-designated Muslim safe haven of Gorazde in eastern Bosnia. —AFP photo.

Off the Record

Lover in quicksand!

SALEM, Ore: A 19-year-old man sank waist-deep into quicksand before half a dozen firefighters were able to pull him out, inch by hard-won inch, reports AP.

Firefighters, working from ladders and wooden pallets laid over the quicksand, wedged boards around Jason Kizziah's body to prevent him from sinking deeper into the mire.

It took 45 minutes of digging and tugging — some firefighters pulling on his upper body, the others grabbing his pants — to get him out.

I've been on the department 16 years, and this is the first time I ever pulled someone out of quicksand," said fire Capt. Jim Streckfuss.

The Salem youth was walking with his girlfriend near a pond Saturday when first his right foot, then his left foot, got stuck and he began to sink.

There were signs warning about quicksand — on the other side of the pond.

Man held with 10 wives and pornographic video tapes

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian authorities arrested a 34-year-old Singaporean and his 10 wives and confiscated several pornographic videotapes in connection with suspected deviationist Islamic teachings, officials said Monday, reports AFP.

"We are still carrying out investigations, including the strength of his following," said a government official by telephone in predominantly Muslim Malaysia's southern Johore state, where the man and his wives were detained on Sunday.

Local newspapers reported that officers of the Johore Islamic department raided the man's house after suspecting him of using it as a centre to propagate deviationist Islamic teachings.

The officers seized several pornographic videotapes, 12 Singaporean passports, 12 Singaporean birth certificates and four marriage certificates issued in Thailand's southern Narathiwat province.

The man's Singaporean wives, aged between 22 and 28, were found living in a neighbouring house with their 17 children, a spokesman for the Johore Islamic affairs department said.

The man was believed to have moved to Johore after his activities were exposed in the Singapore media, officials said.

Local newspapers quoted Singapore media reports as saying that the man was sacked from the Singapore Religious Teachers' Association (Pergas) after being accused of misconduct.

Indian minister beaten up

NEW DELHI, Apr 11: In a case of mistaken identity, undercover policemen got into a street brawl with a government minister and his sons, and six cops ended up getting arrested, reports AP.

The fight, which occurred Saturday night and was reported on the front pages of newspapers Monday, involved Food Secretariat Ashok Chandra Sen, his two sons, and their security officer.

It all began when the Sen family parked its car on a city street and one of the two sons, 23-year-old Anindya, ran into a fast-food see out the car was blocked by another one parked in the middle of the road and filled with five undercover policemen. The policemen, who also had stopped for kebabs, refused to move out of the way and an argument followed.

The policemen beat Anindya and brought him to a nearby police department. The minister rushed there with his other son and guard., and another fight broke out, injuring all three of them.

When the identities of the victims became known, the five officers and one of their superiors were arrested and suspended.

Regional politicians to meet in Vienna to end Kashmir crisis

NEW DELHI, Apr 11: A key pro-independence Kashmiri group said on Sunday that it had called a rare meeting of regional politicians in Vienna next week to defuse tensions between India and Pakistan over their claims on the Himalayan region, reports Reuter.

Professor Abdul Ghani, spokesman for the Hurriyat (freedom) conference representing some 27 groups, told Reuters that its leaders in the Indian-ruled Jammu and Kashmir state had arrived in Delhi and were awaiting Indian passports.

"We had decided to collect in Vienna, to rise to the occasion to help India and Pakistan resolve their differences," Ghani said.

Ghani said prominent leaders from the Pakistan-ruled part of Kashmir were due to join the meeting.

"But we need passports and visas," Ghani said. "My passport was impounded a year ago, and there are others who don't have their travel documents in place," he said.

Ghani said the conference has no defined agenda.

"Kashmir is not just the problem of Muslims living there," he said." It poses a threat to the entire region. We intend to join our heads to see how best we can defuse the threat, fairly and effectively.

The leader of the Jammu-based Jand K Panthers party Bhim Singh, a Hindu, said he had spoken to the Prime Minister of the Pakistani ruled Kashmir.

"He said he would be coming," Singh told Reuters.

There was no immediate word from the Indian government on whether it approved of the meeting or about the passports requested by the Hurriyat representatives.

But, Singh, widely seen as close to Indian Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao, said he was trying to fix visas and passports for the group.

Singh said the talks in Vienna would take into account the various ethnic groups on both sides of the border.

Senior US officials last week met the Hurriyat group in Srinagar, summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir.

But Ghani denied reports in local newspapers that its leaders had arrived in Delhi to meet US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott who was visiting India earlier this week.

The meeting never took place, he said.

Diplomats say a four-year old insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir, in which at least 16,000 people have been killed, was discussed between Talbott and Indian officials.

Russian jets force down Israeli plane

MOSCOW, Apr 11: Russian fighter jets forced a civilian Israeli plane to land after it intruded into Russia's air space, the military said Monday, reports AP.

Col. Vladimir Beketov, spokesman for the Russian Defence Ministry, said the Israeli Gulfstream-159, a small business jet, crossed Russia's border Saturday on a flight to Tel Aviv from Tbilisi, capital of the former Soviet republic of Georgia.

Rao warns against F-16 delivery to Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Apr 11: Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao warned today that tensions on the subcontinent would escalate if the United States went ahead and delivered F-16 fighter planes to Pakistan, reports AFP.

Rao said at a meeting of air force commanders here, that the planned delivery of 38 F-16s to Islamabad, would upset South Asia's security balance and heighten military tensions, defence officials reported.

Pakistan, with which India has fought three wars since 1947, was engaged in an effort to increase its air power beyond its "legitimate requirements," Rao was quoted as saying.

India's own efforts to modernise its air force have been set back by a lack of money and the disruption of supplies following the disappearance of the Soviet Union, its main military partner.

Rao said the Indian Air Force (IAF) would have to maintain the "highest level of operational preparedness" and urged military strategists to stress "cost-effective air power."

Indian concerns over Washington's proposal to supply the aircraft, in an exception to a ban on US military aid to Pakistan, was made known to Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott during his visit here last week.

The White House has asked the US Congress for one-time waiver of the ban on military sales to Pakistan, to allow delivery of the planes, which Islamabad has already partly paid for.

The supply of the aircraft—which are reportedly capable of carrying nuclear weapons — would be conditional on Pakistan agreeing to a verifiable cap of its nuclear weapon programme.

On Sunday the Pakistani government, at the end of a two-day visit by Talbott, ruled out freezing its nuclear programme unilaterally unless its rival India accept dissimilar curbs.

Tensions between arch-rivals India and Pakistan have heightened since Muslim militants launched a guerilla campaign in 1989 for an end to Indian rule in Kashmir, subject of a dispute between the two countries.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and training the militants, a charge denied by Islamabad.

134 monks held in S Korea

SEOUL, Apr 11: Riot police stormed the main temple of South Korea's largest Buddhist order today and arrested 134 monks involved in a protest over their head priest, reports Reuter.

A police spokesman said hundreds of police stormed an administration building in the compound of the Ghogy temple in central Seoul to disperse opposing groups of monks.

A group of reformist monks took over part of the five-storey block on Sunday afternoon in an attempt to force the resignation of the head priest, Suh Eui-Hyon.

The monks are calling for Suh's resignation because of his alleged involvement in a multimillion dollar business scandal.

"A total of 134 monks, including 51 monks supporting Suh, are under questioning in police custody.

South Korean reformist monks fight with riot police as they try to push through a human barricade of police surrounding the secretariat building of the Chogye temple on Monday in Seoul, where conservative monks are held up to protect their scandal ridden prelate, Reverend Suh Eui-Hyun, accused of corruption and links with politicians. — AFP photo

Dostum's jets bomb two sorties over Kabul

KABUL, Apr 11: Fighter jets belonging to Afghanistan's powerful Uzbek warlord bombed the shattered capital Monday, the first air raid in nearly three weeks, reports AP.

There were no immediate reports of casualties, but at least one bomb was believed to have landed in a residential area, according to eye witnesses.

Witnesses said the jets dropped six bombs in two sorties over the capital.

Warlord Rashid Dostum and his ally, renegade Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, have been trying to topple President Burhanuddin Rabbani, whose forces have managed to hold on to key military sites.

Since January 1, rival Islamic factions have killed as many as 1,500 people and wounded 12,000 more. Relentless rocket attacks have destroyed entire neighbourhoods in Kabul's south and east districts.

At least two bombs hit a strategic, Rabbani-held hill on the western edge of the city, said government officials, who asked not to be identified.

Another bomb landed on a Rabbani-controlled hill behind the residential neighbourhood of Wazir Akbar Khan in east Kabul.

Most civilians have fled Wazir Akbar Khan, but it is still home to the International Committee for the Red Cross.

Hours before the jet attack, the warring sides waged a fierce artillery battle in Kabul's eastern district, said the government officials.

There were no reports of casualties. Few civilians still live in eastern neighbourhoods of Kabul.

Zhirinovsky tirades against French govt

PARIS, Apr 11: Russian ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky arrived in France on Sunday and wasted no time launch into a tirade against the French government and Western Europe, reports Reuter.

"It's all over for you (Western Europe) once you're Americanised and Zionised," Zhirinovsky told Reuters television as he stood outside Paris Roissy Charles de Gaulle airport.

France grudgingly gave Zhirinovsky a limited visa to attend the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly in the eastern city of Strasbourg beginning today.

British troops ready to leave Hong Kong and 'fly into history'

HONG KONG, Apr 11: Boots, jeeps, spent shells and assault craft — it's all got to go. China recovers Hong Kong soon, and the departing British army is holding garage sales of historic proportions, reports AP.

Chinese troops will march into Hong Kong in July 1997, so the British are packing, mothballing weapons, clearing barracks and preparing to leave. What they can't take with them is coming under the auctioneer's gavel.

Unlike many other colonies Britain has left, Hong Kong is being ceded without a shot. Britain and China agreed on the transfer of sovereignty in 1984.

"It's the first time, I believe, that we have handed over our property to a foreign power — and a communist one at that — and that makes Hong Kong unique," army spokesman Paddy Hartigan said in an interview.

For famed units like the Nepalese 10th Gurkhas and the Black Watch regimental brass band, Hong Kong will be the last stop in long, distinguished service. They are going out of existence, victims of the Cold War's end.

"It's not just our unit. It's happening to armies all over the world," said Ian Peaple, leader of the band.

"Scotland the Brave" and "Highland Laddie" filled the humid Hong Kong air when the 200-year-old band performed publicly for the last time at a rugby tournament in March. Band members, nicknamed "kilted foreigners" by locals for their resplendent skirts, feathered black hats and sporrans, will board planes for home May 2 and "fly into history," Peaple said.

Britain plans to reduce its total forces by 40,000, or 20 per cent, by 1995. Withdrawal from Hong Kong will end Britain's military commitments east of Suez and reduce its once-mighty empire to 13 colonies.

"It's like the last days of the Raj," said Maj Mike Edwards, who is supervising the sale of surplus equipment. "When you think that there are fewer and fewer places to be posted to as interesting as this, it's quite said, really."

Hong Kong, with its vibrancy and night life, was a plum posting for British soldiers, especially compared to tours of Northern Ireland or Germany.

"There's a lot of vestiges of the empire still around here, and if you go to Germany you don't get any of that," Edwards said.

Hong Kong's garrison will drop from 7,500 to about 3,200 by year's end, the Royal Navy already has shifted its base offshore, and police, not soldiers, now patrol the border with China. The Chinese have not said how large their garrison will be, but newspapers have mentioned 10,000 troops.

The Black Watch, which saw action from Guadaloupe in 1759 to Korea in 1952, hands over in September to a reduced contingent of Gurkhas and local soldiers. They will handle things until a British regiment returns for the last six months before Hong Kong is returned to China.

As barracks are cleared, the army has increased auctions of surplus equipment from quarterly to bi-monthly. At the most recent sale in March, about 50 scrap merchants, bargain hunters and traders, mostly local Chinese, packed a small auctioneer's office in central Hong Kong to buy everything from old staff cars to ammunition boxes.

Lot B6, consisting of 2,650 uniforms, went for 850 dollar. Lot A8, a 1989 Austin Metro in working order, fetched 320 dollars. In an earlier sale, a British businessman bought six helicopters for 148,000 dollars.

China has said its soldiers will learn English and the local Chinese dialect and may use the Prince of Wales building, the British army headquarters on the waterfront.

Many people who fled to Hong Kong when the Communists won China's civil war in 1949 find the prospect of Chinese troops patrolling the streets unnerving.

A newspaper poll last year found 62 per cent of Hong Kong residents opposed stationing Chinese troops in urban areas, and 46 per cent said they had "a bad impression" of the Chinese military.

Khmers kill 13 Vietnamese

HANOI, Apr 11: At least thirteen ethnic Vietnamese, including nine women and children, have been killed in a gun and grenade attack blamed on Khmer Rouge guerillas in Kandal province in Cambodia, the Vietnami news agency reported today, reports AFP.

The official news agency said seven or eight people, said by residents of Trosla village to be Khmer Rouge guerillas, attacked the village late Saturday, killing 13 and injuring 27 others.

The report said nine children and at least one woman were among the dead.

Around 30,000 refugees are stranded in border provinces of Vietnam, unable to return to Cambodia, while another 5,000 to 6,000 are on the Cambodian side.