

Wijetunga wooing Hema to head off crisis in UNP

COLOMBO, Apr 24: President Dingiri Banda Wijetunga is planning a cabinet reshuffle and is wooing the widow of his slain predecessor to head off a crisis within Sri Lanka's ruling party, political sources said today, reports AFP.

Wijetunga, 72, held talks last week with former President Ranasinghe Premadasa's widow, Hema, who had been sidelined by the ruling United National Party (UNP) despite her attempts to enter politics.

Analysts had said that UNP lost the March 24 local elections partly because it abandoned the populist policies of Premadasa and openly criticised the widow and her politically ambitious son Sajith.

The widow brushed aside convention to make a political speech at the funeral of Premadasa, who was blown up by a suspected suicide bomber during a May Day rally here last year, and vowed to give leadership to his supporters.

However, the UNP kept her away from politics until last week when senior party men began bending over backwards to ensure her participation at a government sponsored ceremony to mark Premadasa's first death anniversary.

Press reports here said the widow and her son were likely to be given important positions in the UNP ahead of the December presidential and parliamentary polls at which the opposition is expected to mount a serious challenge.

Sino-Indian border talks end

BEIJING, Apr 24: China and India ended here Saturday a second round of talks between expert groups on the countries' disputed border, Xinhua news agency reported, says AFP.

In three days of talks, the diplomatic and military delegations discussed the implementation of last year's agreement on maintaining peace and tranquility in border areas and signed regulations on the work of the expert groups, the agency said.

They agreed in principle that the next session would be in New Delhi at the end of the year, the brief dispatch said.

The first round of talks aimed at cutting military deployment on both sides of the frontier was held.

Serbs comply with ultimatum, withdraw heavy weapons

SARAJEVO, Apr 24: Bosnian Serb forces complied with a NATO ultimatum to stop attacking the Muslim-held town of Gorazde and withdraw their heavy weapons, United Nations officials said early today, reports-AFP.

As the 170 United Nations Protection Force troops who reached the battered enclave in eastern Bosnia late Saturday began taking up their positions, an UNPROFOR spokesman here said the town was quiet after another day of heavy shelling lasting till the evening.

Eric Chaperon said it was impossible to determine whether all the Bosnian Serbs and their weapons had withdrawn to the required three kilometre (two mile) radius around the centre.

But in Zagreb UN special envoy Yasushi Akashi said one hour after the 0001 GMT ultimatum expired that the situation in Gorazde "did not justify air strikes" threatened by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

"The compliance is quite positive, the ceasefire is generally holding and UNPROFOR has already deployed approximately 200 people, soldiers who are beginning to interpose themselves between the Serb forces and the Bosnian Muslim forces," Akashi told a press conference.

At UN headquarters in New York, a spokesman also said the Serbs appeared to be complying with the NATO ultimatum issued Friday in an attempt to end a month of vicious shelling of Gorazde which left some 700 people dead.



Displaced persons and refugees from the Serbian occupied areas in Croatia throw their messages in bottles from the Liberty bridge over the Sava river in Zagreb, April 23, intended to reach the Serbian capital Belgrade by river, in an attempt to send notes of peace to Serbia. — AFP photo

Russia won't tolerate outside mediation in Black Sea Fleet issue

MOSCOW, Apr 24: Russia warned Ukraine Saturday against seeking mediation from a third country to resolve the ongoing dispute over dividing up the prized Black Sea Fleet, reports AFP.

"Ukraine is making inappropriate suggestions that a third power could assist in settling the dispute," presidential spokesman Vyacheslav Kostikov said in a statement released to the media.

"Russia will not tolerate any outside interference on the issue of the Black Sea Fleet," he said.

His statement came after Ukrainian parliamentary speaker Ivan Plyushch suggested the United States might act as a broker in the dispute, citing as an example of successful mediation the US-Russian-Ukrainian nuclear disarmament agreement reached in January, the Interfax agency reported.

Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Boris Tarassuyk meanwhile reiterated Saturday in Kiev that the presence of a

"third party" at the negotiating table could help jumpstart the talks, Interfax said.

Russian Defence Minister General Pavel Grachev walked out of two days of talks with Ukraine Friday after both sides locked horns over establishing separate home bases for the Ukrainian navy and the Black Sea Fleet.

Kostikov said President Boris Yeltsin had held intense consultations with Russian government officials following the breakdown in negotiations Friday.

He added that Yeltsin was "concerned over Ukraine's unwillingness to abide by the understanding, reached in Moscow and outlined in the agreement, on separate bases of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the Ukrainian naval forces."

Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk signed last week in Moscow an agreement - the fourth in the last two years - under which Russia was to receive 85 per cent of the Fleet.

BRIEFLY

Christopher due in Cairo Apr 27:

US Secretary of State Warren Christopher is due to arrive in Cairo on Wednesday for talks focused on boosting Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations, an Egyptian Foreign Ministry official said Saturday, AFP reports from Cairo.

Christopher, who will arrive here after discussion with King Hussein of Jordan in London on Monday, is to meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Foreign Minister Amr Mousa.

The talks will also touch on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's role in trying to resolve the stand off with the Serbs in Bosnia, the official added.

Vietnam's President to visit Iran: Vietnamese President Le Duc Anh will soon visit Iran in the highest-level official exchange between the two oil producers, the government said, Reuter reports from Hanoi.

A Foreign Ministry statement reported by the official Vietnam News Agency (VNA) on Saturday did not give dates for the official "friendship" visit.

Iranian ministers told Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam in Tehran last May that Iran, which does not currently have a stake in Vietnam's offshore oil exploration blocks, was ready to build oil refineries and undertake oil exploration in Vietnam.

24 militants killed in Algeria: Security forces have killed 24 armed Islamic fundamentalists in Algeria, while militants assassinated five civilians, police said Saturday, AFP reports from Algiers.

The death toll covered the three days ending Friday. Eight of the fundamentalists were killed in Algiers Province, eight in Chief Province, six in Mila Province, one in the city of Blida and another in Batna.

One military policeman died during the clash in Chief. Meanwhile five civilians, including a 75-year-old woman, were killed in various attacks attributed to Islamic groups.

Guerillas kill 12 in Peru: Guerillas killed 12 people and wounded 16 in an attack on a truck carrying civilians and army servicemen in the Andean Department of Pasco east of Peru's capital, a military command said Saturday, Reuter reports from Lima.

A column of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) guerilla group ambushed the vehicle Wednesday night on a mountain road 185 miles (300 km) east of the capital, slaying nine civilians and three servicemen, the military command of Huancayo said.

1 more killed in Thai blast: A third person has died and eight people were still in critical condition yesterday after a bomb exploded on a crowded railway station platform in southern Thailand Saturday, AFP reports from Bangkok.

Security was stepped up throughout the troubled southern region as well as in Bangkok, where officials said they had received reports of a similar bomb plot in preparation for next month.

Police in Nakhon Si Thammarat, 780 kilometres (480 miles) south of Bangkok, said by telephone yesterday that the investigation was proceeding, but they declined to give details.

Blast outside UN offices in Athens: An explosive device blew out windows and damaged cars outside U.N. offices in central Athens yesterday but caused no injuries, police said, Reuter reports from Athens.

The blast, the latest in a series of bomb attacks, occurred near Kolnaki Square, a popular tourist spot, and police believed it was the work of the leftist popular armed struggle group (ELA).

In the past two weeks suspected leftist guerillas have bombed and fired grenades into the office of U.S. Dutch and German firms, and bombed cars of French, Dutch and Swedish diplomats. They failed in an attempt to fire rocket-propelled grenades at a British aircraft carrier.

Iraqi Speaker in Islamabad: Speaker of Iraqi National Assembly Saadi Mehdi Saleh arrived in Islamabad yesterday on a four-day official visit to Pakistan on the invitation of Pakistan National Assembly Speaker Yousaf Raza Gilani, Xinhua reports from Islamabad.

Talking to newsmen on his arrival, Saleh said Kashmir is a political problem and should be resolved through political means.

Zahir Shah's role in Afghan political process demanded Noisy demonstration greets UN mission in Quetta

QUETTA, Pakistan, Apr 24: A special UN mission seeking peace in Afghanistan was greeted in western Pakistan on Saturday by a noisy demonstration by several hundred supporters of former Afghan king Zahir Shah, reports Reuter.

Truckloads of Afghans waving Afghanistan's old black, red and green royal national flag greeted the Mission leader, former Tunisian Foreign Minister Mahmoud Mestiri, as he arrived in the southwestern Pakistani town of Quetta where many refugees live.

They shouted slogans in support of Zahir Shah, who has lived in exile in Rome since he was toppled in a 1973 coup, and demanded he brought back to play a role in the Afghan political process.

They called for the convening of a traditional Loya Jirga (grand council) to decide the political future of their war-ravaged country.

"We want Zahir Shah" "we want Loya Jirga," "We don't want foreign interference," they shouted.

Mestiri is hearing the views of Afghans on how the UN can help to end factional fighting that has killed more than 11,000 people in the two years since the Mujahideen guerrillas took power from the former Soviet-backed government after 14 years of civil war.

Mestiri heard more than 100 elders religious leaders and people from southern Afghanistan at a meeting in a Quetta hotel.

Many called for the resignation of both Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani and his arch-foe Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who are battling for supremacy in Kabul, and for the formation of an interim government of neutral Afghans.

They also demanded the UN play a greater role in the Afghan political process. Heated disagreement erupted between speakers who called for a Loya Jirga, traditionally attended by tribal leaders, and those who wanted an Islamic Shura (council), whose members are selected according to their Islamic credentials.

However, the majority of men at the meeting joined to shot down one man who suggested that because women made up half the Afghan population, they should have equal participation in national affairs.

Fighting leaves 158 injured in Kabul

KABUL, Apr 24: At least 158 people were injured in an overnight battle that erupted in Kabul between rival forces fighting for and against President Burhanuddin Rabbani, officials said here Saturday, reports AFP.

Troops exchanged artillery and heavy weapons fire during the clash, but government troops said they had "repulsed" renegade fighters of Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

They also claimed that "heavy casualties" were inflicted on the troops of Hekmatyar and Uzbek fighters of militia warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, the premier's main battle ally.

The attack started at 7 pm (1430 GMT) and reached its peak at 10 pm lasting till midnight, a government soldier told AFP in the scarred Microayan housing estate, situated near the former diplomatic enclave of Wazir Akbar Khan.

Rabbani's troops on Kabul's eastern front said troops of Hekmatyar and Dostum's Uzbek warriors attacked them at several points.

Hekmatyar's Shi'ite ally, the Hezb-I-Wahdat faction, also joined the battle, engaging Rabbani's troops at the city's south, the government troops said.

Reports of deaths from the clash were not immediately available but the Jamhuriat hospital here said three civilians died of their injuries while a 10-year-old boy with a bullet wound in the chest was in a critical condition.

During Friday's fighting a phosphorus shell slammed into the International Committee of the Red Cross complex but did not explode.

cooperated with Hamas or other groups that are killing Israelis.

Jordan's King Hussein outlawed the group earlier this month at Israel's urging. Israel on Tuesday rounded up nearly 400 Hamas activists in the occupied territories after 13 Israelis died and scores more were wounded in a spate of revenge attacks for the Feb. 25 Hebron mosque massacre.

Hamas has violently opposed the Sept. 13 Israel-PLO autonomy accord and officially still advocates the elimination of the Jewish state. But in comments published in Amman this week, a Hamas leader said the group was ready to make peace if Israel withdrew from the occupied territories.

The remarks by Mousa Abu Marzouk, Syria-based head of Hamas' political office, marked the first time a Hamas leader publicly said the movement no longer demanded the total annihilation of Israel.

On Friday, underground groups attached to Hamas and the PLO announced they had signed a cease-fire agreement in the Gaza Strip, renouncing "disputes and bloody conflicts" and agreeing to put killings of Arab collaborators on hold for a month.

The agreement appeared aimed at ending a series of violent disputes that led to bloodshed earlier this month in southern Rafah in Gaza when on Palestinians 30 were injured during a fight between Hamas and the Fatah Hawks, the armed units of the main-

PPP wins vote of confidence in NWFP

PESHAWAR, Pakistan, Apr 24: Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's party won a vote of confidence Sunday in the Northwest Frontier Province, unseating the region's ruling coalition government, reports AP.

Her liberal Pakistan People's Party ousted its conservative rivals, who boycotted the session to protest what they called "an unconstitutional, illegal and immoral" power grab.

The victory put the Ms. Bhutto's party and its allies in control of three of the four provincial legislatures in Pakistan. The only province run by her political rivals is Baluchistan, a sparsely populated region largely controlled by independent tribesmen.

Ms. Bhutto's party garnered 42 votes in the Northwest Frontier's 81-member House, but it will be forced to form a coalition government with independents and members of small religious parties.

Ms. Bhutto's party has only 24 seats in the legislature. The vote was won largely on the support of independent legislators.

Off the Record

Phone booths being fitted with hidden cameras

LONDON: British telephone booths are being fitted with hidden cameras the size of a fingertip in an effort to catch thieves breaking into their cash boxes, a newspaper said on Saturday, reports Reuter.

The cameras begin filming when their high-tech sensors detect any tampering with the coin box and relay pictures to a control room, The London Times newspaper said. British Telecom aims to fit up to 500 gadgets in booths across Hampshire, southern England, by the end of the year, it added.

A BT spokesman said the initiative was part of a 10 million pound (15 million) security operation designed to slash telephone crime, adding: "There is no question of taking pictures or listening to people just using the phone normally."

Stallone sends sloppy letter to ex-fiancee

NEW YORK: Sylvester Stallone isn't into long goodbyes, reports AP.

When he wanted to break off his 5 1/2-year relationship with model Jennifer Flavin last month, he sent the painful news by Federal Express.

"He sent me a six-page handwritten letter," Flavin told People magazine for its May 2 issue. "It was pretty sloppy."

Flavin's agent told her Stallone was having an affair with model photographer Janice Dickinson, who gave birth in February to a daughter reported to be Stallone's.

"It hit me like a ton of bricks," Flavin said of the breakup. "I had no idea this was going to happen. We talked about us having children, about when I was going to get pregnant. We were already picking names, marking down names that he liked and I liked."

Stallone, in Miami for filming of the movie "The Specialist," wouldn't comment on his private life, the magazine said.

Bizarre burglaries!

NICOSIA, Cyprus: A 29-year-old man has been arrested on suspicion of stealing condoms and chewing gum and of cracking open a piggy bank, the Cyprus Mail reported Tuesday, says AP.

The English-language daily said George Papadopoulos, a worker for the state electricity authority, was ordered held for investigation for eight days by a court in the resort city of Lamaca.

Police told the newspaper he was suspected in connection with 15 bizarre burglaries, including one in which a piggy bank containing 4 pounds (1.8 kilograms) in coins was smashed.

Israeli-Palestinian co-production of Romeo and Juliet

JERUSALEM: Wherefore art thou, Romeo? Fearing a terrorist attack in Jerusalem, he grabbed Juliet off an Old City balcony and sought refuge in a discotheque, where young lovers can kill themselves in peace, reports AP.

A joint Israeli-Palestinian production of Shakespeare's tragedy, planned for the cobbled streets and balconies of Arab east Jerusalem's Old City, will instead be staged in a disco in the city's Jewish west.

"The security situation is very sensitive," director Eran Baniel told The Associated Press on Monday. "We thought it would be better to move it west."

Baniel said he was worried about terror attacks aimed at derailing PLO-Israeli peace talks.

A Palestinian armed with an axe on Monday wounded two Israelis on a bus near Jerusalem.

The walled Old City, home to 17,000 Muslims, 5,000 Christians and 3,000 Jews is often the focus of Arab-Jewish tension.

Baniel has cast a Palestinian as Romeo and an Israeli as Juliet. "It's a Palestinian-Israeli co-production, which is rare," he said. "It was set up to be kosher — artistically and politically."

3 ANC activists killed

ULUNDI, South Africa, Apr 24: At least three election workers of South Africa's African National Congress were killed on Saturday when they tried to distribute pamphlets in the stronghold of Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, reports Reuter.

Police Captain Solomon Zawke told reporters in Ulundi, capital of Buthelezi's KwaZulu Homeland in Natal province, that an angry mob burned one canvasser to death and shot another.

He said a third died of a gunshot wound after taking refuge in a police station but the circumstances were not clear.

An ANC statement expressed shock and outrage at the attack.

Hamas wants to join Palestinian admn in Gaza, Jericho

TUNIS, Apr 24: The Islamic militant group Hamas, previously opposed to the Israel-PLO autonomy accord, has offered to take part in the Palestinian administration in Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho after Israeli withdrawal, PLO officials said Saturday, reports AP.

It was not clear what prompted the apparent softening in Hamas' policy, but the group has been under increasing pressure from Jordan and Israel to halt its violent activities.

Sakhr Abu-Nizar, a member of the PLO's mainstream Fatah central committee, said Hamas last week offered to take part in the Palestinian administration and that Fatah leadership was discussing a plan to re-

joined to the Hamas' proposal. He said Arafat would meet Hamas leaders soon to "discuss how to make the proposal workable."

Arafat spokesman Marawan Kanfani confirmed that Arafat had received the proposal from Hamas, and that he was willing to discuss it.

"Arafat has always been ready to meet Palestinian national leaders and discuss with them issues related to our cause in the framework of Arab national unity," said Kanfani.

It was unknown what Israel's response might be to the proposed inclusion of Hamas in the Palestinian autonomy government. Israel last week threatened not to implement autonomy if the PLO

cooperated with Hamas or other groups that are killing Israelis.

Jordan's King Hussein outlawed the group earlier this month at Israel's urging. Israel on Tuesday rounded up nearly 400 Hamas activists in the occupied territories after 13 Israelis died and scores more were wounded in a spate of revenge attacks for the Feb. 25 Hebron mosque massacre.

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The agreement appeared aimed at ending a series of violent disputes that led to bloodshed earlier this month in southern Rafah in Gaza when on Palestinians 30 were injured during a fight between Hamas and the Fatah Hawks, the armed units of the main-

stream PLO group.

PLO and Israeli negotiators in Cairo have said they are near finalizing the self-rule agreement: Israeli media reported Friday that an agreement ending the eight months of difficult negotiations will be signed May 3 or 4.

Abu-Nizar said Hamas' offer was embraced by the PLO leadership. "We welcome the participation of all Palestinian factions in the national authority and those who are willing to sail with us will find a place on the ship," he told The Associated Press.

Another PLO official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the Hamas offer was part of the cease-fire accord reached with Arafat's Fatah.

The official, one of Arafat's

most trusted aides on Gaza affairs, said Hamas offered to take part in all the administrative to be formed by the self-rule body, including a 9,000-strong police force which will be responsible for security in the West Bank town of Jericho and Gaza.

But the official said Hamas' participation initially would be in low-level positions and that the group would not take part in the decision-making Palestinian National Authority to be headed by Arafat.

The Abu Dhabi newspaper Al Itihad quoted unnamed sources in Cairo as saying Arafat would travel to Amman, Jordan next week for a reconciliation meeting with Hamas leaders.

Germany invites Chinese dissident Wang Juntao

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BONN, Apr 24: Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel has invited freed Chinese dissident Wang Juntao, who left China Saturday for the United States, to visit Bonn along with his wife Hou Xiaolian, the ministry said today, reports AFP.

Wang, one of the leaders of the Tiananmen Square democracy movement crushed in 1989, was put on a flight for the United States after being released from jail to receive medical treatment for severe hepatitis, his mother Ge Yumei said in Beijing Saturday.

Kinkel expressed "great relief" at the former journalist's release and recalled he had interviewed "personally and for a long time" to get him out of prison.