

Mandela to step down after two years?

LONDON, May 15: Nelson Mandela, South Africa's newly-installed president, plans to step down after just two years in office after overseeing the introduction of a new constitution, the Sunday Times newspaper said here, reports AFP.

Mandela has "privately hinted he will step down once a final constitution has been written and he has overseen the country's first steps towards reconciliation," the paper said, citing ANC insiders.

According to the paper "his determination to give up power well ahead of the next general election has sparked a power struggle within the African National Congress," which won a landslide victory in last month's historic all-race poll.

Mandela, 75, was sworn in as president last Tuesday before an array of world leaders, the pinnacle of a political career which saw him move from rural poverty to lawyer activist, guerrilla commander and languish for 27 years in jail.

S Arabia deploys riot police around Iranian Hajj camp

TEHRAN, May 15: Saudi riot police took up positions around the Iranian pilgrims camp at Makkah Saturday where a political rally is due to be held despite a Saudi ban, the official agency Irna said, reports AFP.

Three days ahead of Tuesday's planned anti-US and anti-Israel demonstrations, police were deployed on both sides of the entrance to the camp, while about 10 police cars and armoured vehicles were stationed in the streets opposite, the agency said.

It also charged that two cameras, placed on the roofs of two tall buildings across the street, were filming all movements to and from the camp around the clock.

Saudi authorities warned last week that it would not allow Iranian pilgrims to carry out their demonstrations.

The warning came after the head of the Iranian pilgrims delegation, Mohammad Mohammad Rey-Shahri, said taking part in the demonstration was an Islamic duty.

Similar demonstrations have triggered clashes with Saudi police in the past, the most violent being in 1987, when 400 pilgrims, including 275 Iranians, were killed. Diplomatic ties between the two countries were broken off for three years afterwards.

Tehran and Riyadh are also in dispute over the numbers of Iranian pilgrims allowed in Makkah this year. Iran says Saudi Arabia has halved its quota of pilgrims to 60,000.

But Riyadh countered that it was applying a quota system agreed with other Islamic countries allowing one pilgrim for every thousands people.



The mediators of the meeting on Bosnia pose for photo after their successful mediation in Geneva on Saturday. From L-R: EU Commissioner Han van den Broek, British Foreign Minister Douglas Hurd, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, German Foreign Minister Klaus, Russian counterpart Andrei Kozyrev and Greek Foreign Minister Karolos Papoulias. The Bosnian Muslim government and Bosnian Croats yesterday agreed to set up a federation Bosnia-Herzegovina. — AFP photo

India extends ban on LTTE

NEW DELHI, May 15: India has extended by two years a ban on Sri Lanka's powerful Tamil Tigers, which have been charged with killing former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, newspapers reported today, says AFP.

The Home Ministry said in a notification issued late Saturday that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would remain outlawed for "threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India."

"The LTTE's objective for a separate homeland for all Tamils threatens the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India and thus falls within the ambit of an unlawful activity," the notification said. India first outlawed the LTTE, which is fighting for an independent Tamil homeland

in Sri Lanka's northeast, on May 14, 1992, a year after Gandhi was assassinated by a suicide bomber in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Gandhi was blown up at an election rally when a woman alleged to be a LTTE member detonated explosive strapped onto her while pretending to touch his feet. The LTTE has denied involvement in the killing.

The notification made no reference to the assassination, but said the LTTE had trained two secessionist groups in Tamil Nadu and "encouraged and aided its members to undertake unlawful activities in India."

The Indian government, the statement added, also had information that the LTTE was trying to infiltrate its cadres, and sophisticated arms and

ammunition into Tamil Nadu, a coastal state of some 55 million Tamils.

The LTTE, one of the best armed and most ruthless of guerrilla groups, once used Tamil Nadu, which is separated from Sri Lanka by a narrow strip of sea, as a sanctuary for its separatist campaign.

The LTTE's ties with New Delhi were soured when India sent troops to Sri Lanka under a peace pact signed with Colombo in July 1987 in an attempt to end Tamil separatism in the island.

The LTTE took on the Indian troops in October that year, and ended up killing nearly 1,200 soldiers before the Indians quit the island in March 1990, leaving the Tigers in control of large areas in Sri Lanka's northeast.



President Bill Clinton (R) sits with, from right, Senator Ted Kennedy, Martin Luther King III, Dexter Scott King, Ethel Kennedy and Irish Prime Minister Albert Reynolds during a groundbreaking ceremony on Saturday for a Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F Kennedy statue at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park in Indianapolis, in USA. Portraits of Robert Kennedy (L) and Martin Luther King Jr. hang in the background. — AFP photo

77 killed in Afghan fighting

ISLAMABAD, May 15: Rival Afghan factions traded nearly two hours of heavy weapon fire, claiming some 77 lives in Kabul on Saturday, a report from Kabul said, says Xinhua.

Troops loyal to President Burhanuddin Rabbani, stationed on the frontline near the Bala Hissar fortress under the control of Uzbek militia warlord Rashid Dostum, said they came under strong attack by Dostum's troops.

Meanwhile, fighting continued in the provinces 200 kilometers north of Kabul around Baghlan and Pul-i-Khumri centres which are under siege by Rabbani's military commander ex-defence minister Ahmed Shah Masood, the report said.

About 2,500 people were killed and tens of thousands of others injured in fighting this year in a new round of power tussle between Rabbani and Heikmatyar who made alliance with Dostum.

Meanwhile Reuters from Kabul reports: At least 55 people were wounded in fresh factional fighting in and around the Afghan capital Kabul overnight and on Saturday, doctors and military sources said.

Forty-six people were wounded in bombing, artillery and machine-gun fire on Friday night between forces loyal to Rabbani and his opponents led by Heikmatyar and Dostum.

Nine people were wounded in rocket and artillery attacks

on Saturday blamed on anti-Rabbani forces, doctors said.

Five pro-Rabbani fighters were wounded on Saturday by a mortar shell landing in southern Kabul, where more than 2,500 people have been killed in four-and-a-half months of the current fighting that erupted on January 1.

An artillery shell hit a large government building housing judicial and some other offices of Kabul province, wounding a visiting army captain and a guard. Two members of a family were wounded by a rocket that landed in the north of Kabul.

Of the 46 casualties on Friday, four were wounded when planes controlled by Dostum bombed.

Premadasa's death: Daughter demands fresh probe

COLOMBO, May 15: The daughter of assassinated president Ranasinghe Premadasa has demanded a fresh probe into his death because of doubts over claims that Tamil Tigers were responsible, a Sri Lankan ruling party official said Sunday, reports AFP.

Dulanjalee Jayakody asked her father's successor Dingiri Banda Wijetunga for an "independent investigation" into last year May 1 bomb attack which killed Premadasa, said the ruling party's General Secretary Gamini Wijesekara.

The government has blamed the rebels of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for what it called a "suicide" bomb attack which also left 24 others dead. Police inquiries, however, have remained inconclusive.

Wijesekara said he paid a courtesy call on Premadasa's widow, Hema, last week when the request for a fresh probe was made.

The ruling United National party (UNP), after its defeat in a recent local election, has been wooing the Premadasa family in an attempt to resurrect the former leader's populist policies to win back votes.

"They realise they cannot win without the Premadasa image. None other than members of the family can portray the Premadasa image... we are the trustees of the Premadasa policies," said Sajith Premadasa in a recent interview.

Koirala rules out split in Nepali Congress

KATHMANDU, May 15: Nepali Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala said that the ruling Nepali Congress (NC) will not split although there are two opposing forces competing in the party, reports Xinhua.

Speaking at a mass meeting held on Saturday at Tanahu in western Nepal, the Prime Minister said that there are two opposing forces competing in the Nepali Congress which is beleaguered by troubles now. The official English daily 'The Rising Nepal' reported here today.

These forces were those in favour of political stability in the country and in the party, and those who are against it, Koirala said, adding there is pressure on the party from the forces of the instabilities.

However, efforts are now underway in the Nepali Congress to save the party from those elements who are out to create instability, he noted.

"There is no need to harbour fears about a possible split, in the party," Koirala stressed, "the party will not split."

Off the Record

Instant fine for selling cigarettes to under 18s

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia will slap instant fines on those who sell cigarettes to under-18s and light up in prohibited places from Monday under a law to curb a growing population of smokers, officials said.

A television ban on direct tobacco advertisements depicting cigarettes and smokers will also be extended to newspapers and other publications under the control of tobacco product regulations, the officials said.

"The regulations are clear and their objective is to promote public health," Health Minister Lee Kim Sai told reporters on Sunday.

Officials said some 2.4 million adults and about 800,000 teenagers among the country's 19 million population were spending about 1.8 billion ringgit on cigarettes a year.

First royal appearance in Saint Petersburg in a century

LONDON: Prince Charles is to start a historic three-day visit to the old imperial Russian capital Saint Petersburg Monday, the first royal British appearance there in a century, reports AFP.

He is going for practical reasons — the heir to the British throne is leading a delegation of his business leaders' forum, launched 10 years ago to support private enterprise, which is providing assistance to the city.

But the visit also has great symbolic importance, as Prince Charles will visit the tombs of the Romanov imperial family, who were related by blood to the British royal family.

In a message before his departure, Prince Charles said the "political and social map of Europe and the former Soviet Union has changed dramatically and that transformation is continuing at a pace few could have foreseen."

"All of us have an immense interest in making sure that new-found freedom and market economies are able to grow on a sound and sustainable basis," he said.

Fay's caning to be subject of books, movie

SINGAPORE: American teenager Michael Fay's controversial caning — expected to be the subject of books and possibly made-for-television movies in the United States — is featured in a book and play now in the works here, Singapore's Sunday Times reported, says Reuter.

It said Straits Times journalist Asad Latif, who wrote several commentaries on the case, is writing the yet untitled book of 100 to 120 pages, he is now negotiating with a publisher.

Fay received four strokes of the cane on May 5 as part of sentence for vandalism. The caning drew protests from several US commentators and President Bill Clinton.

Latif said so much information came in on the case he was unable to incorporate it all in his reports. "The book flashes out the whole case," the Sunday Times quoted him as saying.

"It is not a behind-the-scenes book. It's more of a between-the-lines book."

Anti-Tibetan riot shatters peace

DHARAMSALA, India, May 15: A two-day orgy of anti-Tibetan violence has shattered the tranquility of this northern Indian town, where the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, has lived in exile for nearly 35 years, reports AFP.

Tibetan homes, shops, schools and monasteries still bear the scars of last month's rampage by scores of Indian youths enraged by the death of a local boy in a knife fight with a Tibetan.

Glass-fitters have begun the painstaking task of replacing the thousands of window panes smashed by the angry mobs, but restoring confidence between Tibetans and their Indian neighbours is likely to take even longer.

Fear and suspicion still prevail, said Tenzing Sangpo, principal of the Tibetan children's village school, which was targeted by the rioters. "There is an atmosphere of uncertainty,"

Sangpo, who helped douse fires set inside the school serving nearly 700 students between the ages of five and 16, described the attacks as a "total shock" our relations had been healthy, he said.

Russian ammunition depot fire put out

MOSCOW, May 15: Emergency workers today put out a fire raging through a major ammunition depot in Russia's far east, Interfax news agency said, reports Reuter.

The depot blew up on Saturday with such force that earth tremors could be felt in the city of Vladivostok, 100 km (60 miles) away.

Dawa Tsering, 40, chief welfare officer for the Tibetan community here, said many Tibetans had been traumatised.

"I don't think this will happen again, but there is still some fear among the people," he said. Many want to leave, and if the Dalai Lama shifts, then everybody or at least 99 per cent of the Tibetans here will also go.

The Dalai Lama established his headquarters in Dharamsala, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas in Himachal Pradesh state, in 1960, a year after fleeing Tibet following an abortive anti-Chinese uprising.

Between 6,000 and 8,000 Tibetans live in Dharamsala and it houses the headquarters of the Tibetan government in exile as well as hospitals, monasteries, a library, and Tibetan Handicrafts and medicine factories.

Tibetan government-in-exile officials here told AFP that the Dalai Lama has decided to stay put for the moment but has sought "concrete assurances" from the state authorities that Tibetans would not be victimised again.

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh urged the Dalai Lama during two meetings last week to remain in Dharamsala and pledged to improve security.

Witnesses said Kishan Kapoor, a member of the state assembly from the Hindu revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party who has demanded that Tibetans leave Himachal Pradesh, delivered an inflammatory speech at the funeral which sent mourners on the rampage again.

Tibetans here charged that local police watched the mayhem, in which a dozen Tibetans were injured.

Lebanese PM ends work stoppage

BEIRUT, May 15: Prime Minister Rafik Al-Hariri called a cabinet meeting for Monday, indicating he is ending a week-long work stoppage that plunged Lebanon into its worst political crisis in nearly two years, reports Reuter.

Hariri's office announced the cabinet meeting late on Saturday after he returned from talks in Damascus with Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad on ending his dispute with President Elias Hrawi and parliament Speaker Nabih Hri.

Political sources in Beirut said earlier the three men had worked out a compromise solution but Hariri was still looking for a way to return to work without losing face.

His announcement of a special cabinet meeting for Monday was an indirect way of saying he was going back to work, the sources said.

BRIEFLY

Arafat-Peres meet in Oslo: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres is to meet PLO leader Yasser Arafat in Oslo in the coming week, Israeli state television said Saturday, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

The two men have been invited by the Norwegian government to take part in a ceremony marking the secret negotiations held between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation in Oslo in early 1993 which eventually led to the accord on Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and Jericho.

Former US President Jimmy Carter, who cosponsored the first agreement between Israel and an Arab country in 1979 which led to peace with Egypt, has also been invited to attend.

Libya's diplomatic ties with SA: Libya and South Africa announced diplomatic relations at ambassador level on Saturday, the official Libyan news agency Jana said, Reuter reports from Cairo.

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and ANC president Nelson Mandela, the newly elected South African president, were political allies during the years of apartheid in South Africa. Libya awarded Mandela and the African National Congress the first 250,000 dollar Gaddafi Human Rights Prize in 1989. Mandela defended Gaddafi in the Lockerbie dispute and praised Libya for training anti-apartheid guerrillas.

Rebels kill 3 cops in Egypt: The militant Islamic group Jamaa Islamiyya said Saturday it had shot dead three policemen and wounded a fourth in the Asyut region, a fundamentalist stronghold in southern Egypt, AFP reports from Cairo.

A statement sent to AFP from the group's armed wing said that Friday's two attacks were "part of a series planned to revenge the murder," on April 25 of Talaat Yassin, the organisation's military leader.

Japan's SDP team goes to China: A delegation from Japan's Social Democratic Party (SDP) left yesterday for Beijing for talks with Chinese leaders, party officials said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The delegation, led by SDP Secretary General Wataru Kubo, is to return home next Sunday.

The SDP withdrew from the ruling coalition just before Prime Minister Tsutomu Hata formed a cabinet on April 28.

US plane crash claims 4: A single-engine plane crashed 3.2 kilometers (two miles) from the airport, killing all four people aboard, authorities said Saturday, AP reports from Camdenton, Missouri.

The plane left East St Louis on Friday evening and was headed to Camdenton, about 80 kilometres (50 miles) south-east of Jefferson City in central Missouri.

The wreckage was found Saturday morning, said Cpl. Ed Lane of the Missouri State Highway Patrol in Jefferson City.

NZ premier leaves for Jakarta: New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger leaves Wellington yesterday morning for Jakarta to start a week long visit to Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia, Xinhua reports from Wellington.

The aim of the visit is to promote New Zealand's relations with the three southeast Asian nations, with economic co-operation top on the agenda in talks between Bolger and leaders of the countries.

Israel to buy 21 US fighters: The United States has agreed to sell Israel 21 advanced jet fighters, a government official said Sunday, AP reports from Jerusalem.

Oded Ben-Ami, a spokesman for Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, said Israel would purchase the F-15i warplanes. He didn't provide further details.

The jet is specially adapted to Israeli needs, officials said. The sale comes amid discussion of an Israeli withdrawal from the strategic Golan Heights in exchange for a peace agreement with Syria.

Macao pardons 130: The Macao government prison has decided to grant special pardon to 130 prisoners, according to a Portuguese government's special amnesty decree on a latest official bulletin, Xinhua reports from Macao.

To commemorate the 20th anniversary of the April 25 movement in 1974, the Portuguese government issued a writ of special amnesty. Under which, Macao prisoners who committed minor offences before March 16 this year would be granted with special amnesty.

Macao governor and local procuratorial organs have agreed to practise the decree.

Move to secure free passage fails

NAIROBI, May 15: A former French minister said he had failed to broker free passage for civilians trapped in Rwanda's blood-soaked capital of Kigali despite lengthy talks with the country's warring parties, reports Reuter.

Bernard Kouchner, a former French Humanitarian Affairs Minister, said the situation in the Central African state had reached desperate levels and only forceful foreign intervention could save survivors of a five-week orgy of killings.

Kouchner went to Kigali to try to persuade the government army and rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) to allow about 360 trapped civilians to leave and to open a humanitarian corridor for thousands of refugees.

But he made no headway, he told Reuters by telephone late on Saturday.

Rwandans paralysed by fear

KIGALI, May 15: They are prisoners in their own capital, paralysed by fear and ravaged by hunger, sheltering from the gunfire in hotels and churches and the Kigali sports stadium, reports AFP.

Some 20,000 Rwandans have fled their homes for what they hope are safer surroundings in the city. There are 3,000 in the Aahoro stadium, more than 6,000 crammed into the King Palsal hospital, several hundred in the Meridien hotel. They are in the sector held by rebels of the Patriotic Front (RPF), which draws support mostly from Rwanda's Tutsi minority.

Across town where troops of the government dominated by the Hutu majority holds way, 5,000 displaced persons have found a refuge in the holy family church and the adjoining school. There are 550 more in the Thousand Hills hotel.

But shells hit the holy family compound last month, killing 15 people and leaving more than 100 wounded. There were similar attacks on the stadium and the hospital, leaving dozens of dead. Everybody else blames the warring forces, but they denied targeting the refugees — it was an accident, mortars are inaccurate weapons, they say.

Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka shows the hole in the church roof. Hundreds of people are lying in the nave, right up to the altar. In a big side chapel, red cross workers tend the wounded.

Many of the refugees in the hotel are educated people branded as intellectual, along with traders, people under threat because of their political allegiances or tribal affiliation. They said they had received word they would be massacred before the week was out.

They sent an SOS to the world community, asking it to put pressure on the authorities here to let them leave.

The United Nations assembled a convoy 10 days ago to take 60 of them to the airport, but soldiers and militia-men turned them back, wounding several people in the process.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Jose Ayala-Lasso met the belligerents on Wednesday and Thursday and got promises that something would be done to let the "hostages" be evacuated. Some want to move to neighbouring countries, others want to go farther afield, while some simply want to change their prefectures, coded language meaning they want to go to an administrative district held by their own tribesmen.

Not all the Tutsi want to go to RPF zones, however, for fear of being forcibly conscripted to rebel ranks.



The bodies of seven North Yemeni soldiers killed in the battle of Daalah lie on the roadside between the village of Markoula and Daalah May 14. South Yemeni forces lost control of Daalah in the fighting. — AFP photo