

## BRIEFLY

**Thatcher refuses to testify:** Ex-prime minister Margaret Thatcher on Thursday refused an invitation to give evidence before a parliamentary committee investigating the handling of aid to Malaysia. AP reports from London.

The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee is probing allegations that an aid deal for building Malaysia's Pergau dam was a sweetener toward selling British fighter aircraft to Malaysia — a deal worth 1 billion pounds (1.5 billion dollars).

It is against government rules to allow any connection to exist between aid money and defence sales. Opposition Labour legislator Dennis Canavan, a member of the House committee, said, "Thatcher has chickened out." He said he was convinced she was involved in a cover-up.

**China has 1159 HIV population:** China's confirmed HIV population has reached 1,159, but health officials say unreported cases could number between 5,000 and 10,000, the Ming Pao Daily News reported yesterday. Reuter says from Hong Kong.

Sun Zinhua, an official at the Ministry of Public Health, was quoted by the Hong Kong newspaper as saying: "Eighty per cent of the AIDS cases are found in Yunnan, where the main infecting conduct is through the use of intravenous drug needles."

**Naruhito, Masako to visit ME:** Japan's Crown Prince Naruhito and Princess Masako will visit several Middle Eastern countries from late October through early November, the Gankel newspaper reported yesterday. AFP says from Tokyo.

The daily said the imperial couple would choose to visit three or four countries from among Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain.

The trip would be the royal couple's first trip abroad together since their marriage in June last year, the daily said.

**Nabil Shaath visits Gaza:** Chief Palestinian peacemaker Nabil Shaath made a surprise trip to the Gaza Strip early yesterday the most senior PLO visitor since Israeli troops pulled out this week. Palestinian sources said. Reuter reports from Gaza.

Israeli radio stations said Shaath, who crossed over from Egypt after midnight, told reporters it was his first visit in 30 years.

**Former Japanese FM dead:** Masayoshi Ito, a stubborn conservative politician who was briefly Japanese Foreign Minister in the early 1980s, died of pneumonia on Friday. NHK television reported. He was 80. Reuter says from Tokyo.

In April 1980, as one of the few senior politicians in the then-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) not implicated in the recruit shares-for-favours scandal, he was asked to take over from disgraced Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita.

Ito, already suffering from diabetes, declined the offer citing health reasons. He retired from parliament at the July 1993 general election after 30 years.

**Mexico bans foreign observers:** Foreigners will not be permitted to intervene in or judge the validity of Mexico's August 21 presidential elections, top officials say. AP reports from Mexico City.

"It is extremely clear that only Mexicans will organise and judge the elections and for no reason will we allow anybody at all from outside to intervene," Interior Minister Jorge Carpizo said in remarks published Thursday.

**Blast in Lebanese school:** A bomb exploded in the cafeteria of the national evangelical school in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon overnight, detonating gas canisters and causing serious damage, police said yesterday. Reuter reports from Sidon, Lebanon.

The blast blew out windows of the school which stands beside the cafeteria in the centre of Sidon, south Lebanon's biggest city, the police said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack. Sidon is a Muslim city with a small Christian community but many Muslims attend the evangelical school.

**One jailed in painting theft:** A court on Thursday sentenced a Corsican farmer and part-time barman to two years in prison for receiving stolen property — nine invaluable paintings, including a Monet that inspired the name of the Impressionist movement. AP reports from Paris.

Pierre Comiti, 34, contended throughout the trial that he had no ties to the four or five thieves, who remain at large nearly nine years after the theft at Paris Marmottan museum. He claimed to be a victim of the thieves' plot.

The court was not convinced.

**SA Senate sworn in**

CAPE TOWN, May 20: South Africa's first all-race Senate is sworn in today, another bastion of white supremacy surrendered to black majority rule, reports Reuter.

But President Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) in a gesture of reconciliation after 341 years of white domination has offered to let the preceding National Party (NP) rulers lead the 90-member Upper House.

ANC and NP sources said on Thursday former justice minister Kobie Coetsee would be nominated as President of the Senate, with an ANC member named as his deputy.

Coetsee, 63, an Afrikaner lawyer from the conservative Orange Free State province, opened negotiations with Mandela while he was still a

political prisoner under apartheid.

Mandela repeatedly paid tribute to Coetsee during his campaign for the first all-race elections in April, which his ANC won by 62 per cent to the NP's 20 per cent.

Chief Justice Michael Corbett, who installed Mandela as the first black President last week, will swear in 60 ANC Senators and 17 from the NP. Senate spokesman Pieter Pretorius said.

Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party and the white-separatist Freedom Front will each nominate five Senators, and the Liberal Democratic Party three, he said.

The Senate will sit in the oldest part of the red brick parliament, a chamber built for the British colonial assembly.

12 countries to contribute to UN mission in Rwanda

UNITED NATIONS, May 20: Twelve countries announced Thursday plans to contribute men or equipment to a new UN humanitarian mission in Rwanda, a UN spokesman said, reports AFP.

No firm offer or number of troops was released, however. Canada said it would seriously examine supplying troops and equipment, but France and Great Britain have spoken only about supplying equipment, said UN spokesman Fred Eckhard.

Australia, Ghana, Senegal, Zimbabwe, The Netherlands, the Congo, Zambia, Mali and Egypt are planning to send infantry soldiers, added Eckhard.

The United Nations is attempting to assemble 5,500 troops authorised by a security council resolution Tuesday.



Queen Elizabeth II smiles as she is introduced to crew members of the HMS Cottesmore by her son, The Duke of York (C) during a visit on board the ship on Thursday. The Duke of York is captain of the Cottesmore. — AFP photo

## South Yemeni forces retreat from a strategic base near Aden

AL-ANAD, Yemen, May 20: Southern Yemeni forces were retreating today from the strategic Al-Anad military base north of the southern port of Aden, a Reuter journalist near the fighting reported.

Correspondent Ashraf Fouad, who reached a point three km (two miles) south of the base, saw southern tanks moving south on transporters. Artillery positions had also been moved south from the key base.

Al-Anad, near a key junction about 65 km (40 miles) north of Aden, is viewed as psychologically as well as militarily important as northern forces press towards the old southern Yemeni capital.

Despite the apparent retreat, southern officers at the front said southern units still

controlled the air strip and associated buildings in the southwest part of Al-Anad base.

They said infantry were fighting northern forces in and around the base, and more infantry were seen heading northwards as reinforcements.

Northern forces loyal to Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh launched an attack on May 4 to crush Saleh's rival, Vice-President Ali Salem Al-Baidh, who is based in Aden.

AP adds: Northern forces claimed Friday they had captured 62 tanks and were slowly driving back southern troops in fierce fighting around a strategic base northwest of Aden, the southern stronghold.

San'a Radio quoted northern military sources as saying President Saleh's forces were

also gaining ground in fighting northeast of Aden in what appeared to be an attempt to drive against the oil city from two sides.

Radio Monte Carlo, an Arabic-language station based in France, reported two northern missiles hit Aden airport around dawn Friday. But there was no mention of that by Aden radio in its early morning newscasts.

The north said its forces overran an artillery brigade with 133mm guns and shot down a southern fighter-bomber in fighting Thursday in the mountains around Al-Anad base, 60 kilometers (35 miles) northwest of Aden.

Fierce artillery, rocket and air battles were reported raging around the base.

Much of the fighting in the

## US House votes to withdraw 75000 troops from Europe

WASHINGTON, May 20: The House of Representatives voted Thursday to withdraw up to 75,000 US troops from Europe if US allies there do not pay 75 per cent of the forces' costs by 1998, excluding salaries, reports Reuter.

The House wrote the proposal into a 263 billion dollar defence authorisation bill for next year by a vote of 268 to 144.

The effort to force Europe to pay a large share of the US troops' cost would have to be approved by the Senate and signed by President Clinton to become law.

Assistant House Democratic leader David Bonior of Minnesota argued that Japan agreed to pay a large share of the cost of US troops stationed in that country when the House passed a similar proposal and said the House should now put the same pressure on Europe.

## Two Israeli soldiers shot dead in Gaza

EREZ CHECKPOINT, Gaza Strip, May 20: Palestinian gunmen shot dead two Israeli reserve soldiers on Friday at this border station between the Gaza Strip and Israel, the army said, reports AP.

The first fatal attack in Gaza since Palestinian self-rule began, coming just a week after Israel ended 27 years of occupation, was sure to intensify calls in Israel to suspend the peace talks with the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

The Palestinian Muslim fundamentalist faction, Islamic Jihad, claimed responsibility for the attack in a handwritten statement faxed to The Associated Press.

The assailants sped off southwards to the autonomous area, said an Israeli officer who would only identify himself as Col. Shaul.

A Palestinian police official,

who declined to be identified, said, no one's looking for anyone. The situation is normal. The subject is closed.

Col. Shaul said the army expected the Palestinian police to cooperate in tracking down the assailants, although he understood why they might not be able to act immediately.

These are sensitive days of organisation ... but we expect the Palestinian police to prevent incursions by armed guerrillas into the areas we control," he said.

A gas station attendant said he heard two rounds of automatic fire at 4:45 am local time and ran to the scene of the shooting.

The attendant, who would only identify himself as Ibrahim, said he saw two dead soldiers and one injured soldier attended by medics.

## Off the Record

### Mystery 'mom' arrested

NEW YORK: A mystery 'mom' who invented 73 children has been arrested for stealing nearly 450,000 dollars from welfare, reports AP.

For almost seven years, the woman used forged documents to collect city, state and federal welfare benefits for the fictitious children — including 11 sets of twins, Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau said Thursday.

As far as authorities know, she doesn't have any real children.

The woman used at least 15 aliases. To this day, "We don't know her true name," Morgenthau said.

The woman, who appears to be between age 45 and 60, was arrested Wednesday at one of the addresses she used, Morgenthau said. The State Department tipped city officials after federal agents arrested her for passport fraud and found indications that she might be a welfare cheat.

A grand jury indicted her for grand larceny, forgery and filing a false instrument. Grand larceny is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Morgenthau said the woman ran the scam from February 1987 at least through December 1993. At her most frenetic in late 1990 and early 1991, she was claiming money simultaneously under eight names for 46 children, Morgenthau said.

### "Hog Log" contains sexual comments

SAN ANTONIO: An Air National Guard commander apologised Thursday to a female officer who filed a sexual harassment complaint over the contents of a fighter pilots' journal, reports AP.

The so-called "Hog Log" kept by the 182nd Air National Guard squadron of the 149th Fighter Group at Kelly Air Force Base contained sexual comments about co-workers and public figures and an ethnic slur against a Hispanic officer.

The Corpus Christi Caller-Times obtained a copy of the log and published excerpts Wednesday.

"I was aware of the existence of the log but was unaware of and do not condone the nature of this log's contents," Col. Gary R. Walston, commander of the 149th, said in a statement Thursday.

Capt Margaret Maestas, a reservist who handles equal opportunity grievances for the fighter group, filed a sexual harassment complaint over the log about three weeks ago.

Walston said he would remind the squadron's members about the guard's policy against sexual harassment.

Maestas did not return a telephone call Thursday from The Associated Press. The Texas Air National Guard is investigating the complaint. Lt. Col. Ed Komandosky said the inquiry could take about a month.

The "Hog Log" was compiled from May 1993 to March 1994, despite increased military awareness about sexual harassment after the 1991 Navy Tailhook scandal. The Tailhook Association convention took place in Las Vegas, and investigators found dozens of women were molested by drunken aviators.

### Blast not intended to harm Miss Universe contestants

MANILA: A homemade bomb exploded outside the site of the 1994 Miss Universe Beauty Pageant in the Philippines capital late Thursday, but the blast caused little damage and no injuries, police said, reports AFP.

The explosion destroyed a concrete garbage box outside the Philippine International Convention Center (PICC) where the pageant will be held early Saturday, police investigators on the scene said.

The 77 contestants had been conducting daily rehearsals at the government-owned buildings, but the practices were already finished and the contestants had returned to their hotel when the blast occurred, they said.

Antonio Modena, a spokesman for the organisers, told AFP the bombing was apparently "an effort to call attention to themselves, whoever they may be" and not intended to harm the contestants.

"I presume the authorities are taking the normal measures necessary to prevent this kind of foolishness," Modena said.

"I don't see why any group would want to harm a group of young ladies who are not doing any crime or (committing) a political offence."

The pageant has been criticised by at least one Filipino senator as a waste of resources, while feminists decry it as an extravagant sex show for a country where 100,000 women work as prostitutes to survive.



Pakistani best-selling author Tehmina Durrani, 41, has a portrait taken on May 19 in Lahore. At work on another book in Pakistan's male-dominated society, where women are bound by tradition and what she calls "the culture of silence," Durrani has chosen to speak out and fight on. — AFP photo

## Manila bans foreigners from confce on East Timor

MANILA, May 20: President Fidel Ramos on Friday banned foreigners from entering the country to attend a conference on East Timor after Indonesia warned the meeting would damage bilateral relations, reports AP.

The Indonesian government has reacted strongly against the planned May 31-June 4 conference, which is to be held at the state-run University of the Philippines.

Indonesia annexed East Timor in 1975 and has been accused by human rights groups of suppressing civil liberties there. About a dozen Filipino leftists picketed the Indonesian embassy Friday accusing Jakarta of human rights

abuses in the territory.

Ramos issued the order after failing to convince the university's president, Emil Javier, to change the location. Javier said constitutional guarantees of freedom of assembly precluded any cancellation of the meeting.

In his order, Ramos said the conference was "inimical to the national interests." He cited the planned attendance of Jose Ramos-Hosta, a leader of the East Timor resistance.

Earlier Friday, Press Undersecretary Honesto Iseta said the Manila government respected the organisers' rights but these can be set aside if the security and interest of the state is at stake. He

suggested the conference be held in the Netherlands or Portugal.

In Jakarta, an Indonesian official Thursday threatened to halt efforts to mediate a settlement of the 20-year Muslim rebellion in the southern Philippines if the conference is held.

Indonesia was host to the first round of peace talks last year between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front, and another meeting is scheduled for June in Indonesia.

The Indonesian-sponsored negotiation will certainly be postponed unless Manila gives a proper response between now and June.

## Britain offers Sinn Fein a concession

LONDON, May 20: Britain offered Sinn Fein a symbolic concession Thursday, explaining to the IRA's political partners its views on a Northern Ireland peace settlement, reports AP.

The document, which Britain prepared in consultation with the Irish government, gave a substantive point-by-point reply — but little ground — to 20 questions sent last week from Sinn Fein.

Britain's gesture makes it harder for Sinn Fein to say, as its leaders for months have protested, that the peace declaration agreed December 15 by the British and Irish governments remains unclear and contradictory.



People push a car trapped in a flooded Hanoi street on Friday after heavy rains hit the capital during the night. Up to a metre of water was recorded in some areas of the city, which has a sewage system that dates back to the colonial era. — AFP photo

## Shanghai shuts down four newspapers

BEIJING, May 20: As part of a national drive to tighten control over the media, Shanghai has shut down four financial newspapers that failed to register with authorities, the official People's Daily said Friday, reports AP.

The Communist Party newspaper said Shanghai officials confiscated 100,000 copies of the newspapers, fined the publishers and ordered them to stop publishing immediately.

The move is striking because the four newspapers focused on the economy and finance, the country's most open sector. They were the Shanghai Stock News, Shanghai Stock Express, Shanghai Stock Market and Finance Weekly.

The four failed to apply for government approval before starting publication.

## Fighting continues in Kigali

NAIROBI, May 20: Army troops pounded and harassed by rebel gunmen held their ground in Rwanda's capital on Friday, battling back with artillery and mortar fire, reports AP.

Intermittent shelling shook the city and closed the airport to relief flights again Friday, but UN officials said Hutu-led government army defenders were holding their positions.

Tutsi rebels raised the ante in the battle for Kigali on Thursday, attacking behind heavy artillery and mortar barges that killed 30 people in a hospital, blasted the airport and closed it to relief flights.

UN spokesman Abdul Kabia in Kigali said UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali had ordered a special envoy to Rwanda to seek the cooperation of the warring factions with the decision to send 5,500 new peacekeepers to the country.

The rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front has said it will not cooperate with the UN mandate as long as UN Special Representative Jacques Booh-Booh remains chief of the UN mission.

Rebel cooperation with the United Nations has deteriorated steadily because of their objections to Booh-Booh, who they claim has been partial to the government.

Iqbal Riza, a Pakistani who is the assistant secretary-general in charge of peacekeeping operations, will arrive Sunday to discuss implementation of the expanded UN mandate.

During the visit, Booh-Booh will remain out of the country, operating out of Nairobi, and consulting with regional governments on ways to ease the humanitarian crisis in Rwanda.

A UN official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said contacts with the rebels have been gradually reduced. He

said UN liaison officers are no longer allowed access to a rebel command post in Kigali.

When the rebels moved their headquarters from Mulindi, just south of the Ugandan border, to Byumba, 45 kilometers (28 miles) north of Kigali, the UN officers were denied permission to move with them.

The first of 5,500 new troops in an all African force are expected to arrive around May 31. Kabia said the first stage will bring the Ghanaian battalion up to its usual strength of 800.

Kabia said Germany has agreed to provide relief flights for the humanitarian operation. All the flights now are Canadian Air Force C-130s. He said the Germans could begin operations next week, but it was not yet clear how many new flights a day that would mean.