

BRIEFLY

Clinton honours 9 Americans:

President Clinton, carrying out "one of the great pleasures of the presidency," awarded the highest US civilian honour on Monday to nine Americans, reports AP from Washington.

The recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom included House of Representatives Minority Leader Bob Michael, two civil rights crusaders, Barbara Jordan and Dorothy Height, and newspaper cartoonist Herbert Block.

Mubarak to visit Gaza:

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has accepted an invitation by PLO leader Yasser Arafat to visit the newly-autonomous Gaza Strip, top Palestinian negotiator Nabil Shaath said on Monday. AFP reports from Cairo.

Mubarak will become the first Arab leader to visit Gaza since his rule was launched there on May 4.

The date of the trip has not yet been set, Shaath said.

Christopher ends ME trip:

US Secretary of State Warren Christopher left the Middle East on Tuesday after saying he had accomplished all that he wanted to accomplish on a four-day mission to promote an Israeli-Syrian peace deal, reports Reuter from Tel Aviv.

Christopher spoke on Monday night but declined to elaborate. He left Israel for Washington.

US pledges \$ 15m aid to Haiti:

The US government on Monday pledged 15 million dollars in food and economic aid to Haiti, but most of the money will be withheld until exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide is returned to power, AP reports from Washington.

Aristide said he hopes to be back in control in a matter of days. A US official said Aristide may be restored to the presidency "in the coming weeks."

147 tons of drugs seized in Iran:

The Iranian security forces seized more than 147 tons of drugs during the past Iranian fiscal year ending March 20, local evening daily "Kayhan" reported on Monday. Xinhua says from Tehran.

Commander of the Iranian law enforcement forces (security forces) Reza Seifollahi announced the figure in Bandar Abbas, saying that the figure was three times of the seized drug during the previous Iranian year.

Blast rocks chemical plant in US:

An explosion and fire on Monday shook an Exxon plant where just over a year ago an explosion in a different section killed three people, AP reports from Baton Rouge.

All employees and contractors were quickly accounted for on Monday. Only five minor injuries were reported, said State Police Sgt. Bobby Guidroz.

Quake shakes northeast India:

An earthquake measuring 6.0 on the open-ended Richter scale rocked northeast India today, but there were no immediate reports of death or serious damage, domestic news agencies reported, says Reuter from New Delhi.

The agencies said the Seismological Department in Shillong, one of the region's main cities, put the epicentre on the India-Myanmar border.

43 die as rival Kurds clash:

Forty-three people died in weekend clashes between rival Kurdish factions which erupted on this northern Iraqi town, hospital officials said on Monday. AFP reports from Gallat Diza.

Sixty-three others were wounded in fighting which flared on Saturday between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani and the pro-Iranian Kurdistan Islamic League (KIL).

Blast kills 3 children in Russia:

Three children were killed and three others suffered burns when a container blew up at a fuel storage depot in the Russian far east, the National Disasters Committee said today, reports Reuter.

The accident occurred on Sunday while the children were playing at the depot at Elban 200 km (125 miles) northeast of Khabarovsk, a spokesman for the committee said.

Airlift to Sarajevo resumes:

The international airlift to Sarajevo resumed Thursday, a United Nations spokesman said, Reuter reports from Geneva.

The lifeline to the besieged city has been interrupted for 19 days, except for a brief resumption last Friday before being suspended as a security precaution.

Russia will sell arms to Kuwait:

Russia agreed on Monday to sell an undisclosed number of armoured personnel carriers and rocket launchers to Kuwait, according to an ITAR-Tass news agency report, says AP from Moscow.

Valery Pogribenko, a spokesman for Rosvozuzhniya, the Russian state arms trading company, confirmed the deal in which Russia will ship its Smerch rocket launchers and BMP-3 armoured carriers to Kuwait.

Kuwait is the first foreign country to buy the Smerch system, which was introduced in the Soviet army in 1987.

75 members of Al-Arqam sect held:

Police have arrested 75 members of the Al-Arqam sect of Islam that was banned last week for its alleged deviationist teaching of Islam, a national news agency reported on Monday, says AP from Kuala Lumpur.

The arrests were made during the last 10 days while the members were distributing the group's pamphlets, but most of them were released on bail, the Bernama news agency said.

China executes 15 for crimes:

Fifteen people were executed in southern China's Guangdong Province Tuesday for crimes ranging from armed robbery to murder, a report said, AP reports from Hong Kong.

A public rally was held in Panyu at a stadium named after Hong Kong business tycoon Henry Fok to denounce the convicts before they were sent to the execution grounds, the China-funded New Evening Post said.

Singapore to widen anti-smoking law:

The government wants to widen a powerful anti-smoking law that would limit smokers to light up only in their homes without fear of fines, a newspaper reported Tuesday. AP says from Singapore.

Serbs block UN military convoys

SARAJEVO, Aug 9: The United Nations said the Bosnian Serbs had today blocked the movement of all UN military convoys on Serb territory, a UN spokesman said, reports Reuter.

Spokesman Major Rob Annink told a news briefing that efforts to resolve the matter with the Bosnian Serbs had proved unsuccessful because of communications problems.

Annink said fax communications with the Bosnian Serb stronghold of Pale near Sarajevo were not functioning and it had not been possible to reach a competent Serb official.

He was not able to give any further information on the Serb action, or say how long it might last.

The move came as tension rose in Serb-held areas of Bosnia following the decision last week by Serbian-led Yugoslavia to cut political and economic ties with the Bosnian Serbs.

Haitians being recruited for military training

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Aug 9: Coup leaders kept up their scare-America campaign Monday, parading 2,000 ragged paramilitary recruits through the capital in hopes of deterring possible US invaders, reports AP.

"We are preparing the people" sang the winded recruits, who included teen-agers and people in their 60s.

They ran in front of army headquarters and the Presidential Palace before practicing military formations in a littered, overgrown downtown park. Some carried old M-1 carbines, but most had no weapons.

Human rights advocates characterised the group as the dregs of society, former Tonton Macoute paramilitary killers responsible for the terror and economic collapse in Haiti since the overthrow of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991.

Meanwhile pro-democracy American clergymen and human rights workers met US Ambassador William Swing, urging Washington to move swiftly to push out army commander Raoul Cedras and break up the military-tolerated network of terror.

"Without quick action, I just anticipate that the level of violence is going to escalate unbelievably," said one meeting participant, Roman Catholic priest Ron Voss.

Weeks ago, the United States rushed world nations to get UN approval to intervene militarily if necessary to restore constitutional government.

But the Haitian military counter attacked with a public relations campaign, including Monday's march and a series of interviews with Cedras in which he pledged to resist any American intervention and to inflict US casualties.

The move came as tension rose in Serb-held areas of Bosnia following the decision last week by Serbian-led Yugoslavia to cut political and economic ties with the Bosnian Serbs.

International

Indian political parties set for confrontation over bank scam

NEW DELHI, Aug 9: Indian political parties were set for confrontation today after the collapse of efforts to end a stand-off over the government's handling of a huge bank fraud, reports AFP.

Opposition parties boycotting parliament stepped up their demand that Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao's government scrap a report disowning responsibility for the 1.3 billion dollars scam.

Rao's ruling Congress (I) Party vehemently rejected a withdrawal of the report it presented on July 26, defending the government against criticism by a parliamentary committee that administrative lapses had encouraged the fraud.

The parliament Speaker Shivraj Patil attempted to mediate on Monday. But he failed and S. Jaipal Reddy, a stalwart of the centrist opposition Janata Dal (People's Party), said "we appear to have reached a dead-end."

The opposition is determined that the government should withdraw the action taken report on the bank scam and make a new report," said Krishan Lal Sharma, spokesman for the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party.

"There is no question of a climb-down," parliamentary affairs minister Vidyasagar Charan Shukla said. "The report will not be withdrawn and there will be no ministerial resignation."

Empty opposition galleries

would not lead to a shortening of parliament's month-long monsoon session, which ends August 26, and launch a public crusade against the three-year-old Congress government.

"There is no fun in having meetings without any result. Unless our demand is accepted, confrontation cannot be avoided," said Sharma, whose party is drawing up a programme of public protests.

The report questioned criticism of the government's role in handling the scam, in which bankers and brokers stole bank funds to play the stock market, fuelling a share price boom.

The fraud was the result of inherent weaknesses in the financial system and not administrative lapses, the government said, ruling out the dismissal of two ministers indicted by the parliamentary panel.

"The opposition is determined that the government should withdraw the action taken report on the bank scam and make a new report," said Krishan Lal Sharma, spokesman for the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party.

"There is no question of a climb-down," parliamentary affairs minister Vidyasagar Charan Shukla said. "The report will not be withdrawn and there will be no ministerial resignation."

Empty opposition galleries

would not lead to a shortening of parliament's month-long monsoon session, which will run until August 26, a ruling party spokesman said.

Opposition parties have accused the Rao government of covering up the scandal and shielding suspects.

Analysts have described the parliamentary tangle as the demise of the "politics of consensus" Rao pledged to follow when he came to power in mid-1991 at the head of a minority government.

The 73-year-old premier has since forged a majority with the help of opposition defectors, and his combative nature is a reflection of the "arrogance of a contrived majority," opposition leader Jaipal Reddy charged.

The issue has led the mutually hostile right-wing BJP and the centre-left coalition to present a united challenge to Rao from an anti-corruption platform.

Empty opposition galleries

would not lead to a shortening of parliament's month-long monsoon session, which will run until August 26, a ruling party spokesman said.

Opposition parties have accused the Rao government of covering up the scandal and shielding suspects.

Analysts have described the parliamentary tangle as the demise of the "politics of consensus" Rao pledged to follow when he came to power in mid-1991 at the head of a minority government.

The 73-year-old premier has since forged a majority with the help of opposition defectors, and his combative nature is a reflection of the "arrogance of a contrived majority," opposition leader Jaipal Reddy charged.

The issue has led the mutually hostile right-wing BJP and the centre-left coalition to present a united challenge to Rao from an anti-corruption platform.

Empty opposition galleries

Thackeray threatens to block Hajj voyage

BOMBAY, Aug 9: A Hindu militant politician warned Kashmiri Muslim rebels here today that he would block the annual Hajj voyage to Mecca if they sabotaged a Hindu pilgrimage, reports AFP.

Bal Thackeray, chief of the fundamentalist Shiv Sena (Shiv's army) said in his Hindi-language Daily Saamna (observer) that Kashmiri militants "would do well to remember that most of the Hajj pilgrims have to leave from Bombay."

Reacting to the "ban" on the Hindu pilgrimage to the Amarnath Cave in Himalayan Kashmir imposed by Muslim separatists, Thackeray wrote in a front-page column: "We will never tolerate hurdles."

Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao and Home Minister Shankarrao Chavan are responsible for Hindus on the Amarnath pilgrimage ... we will not keep quiet if anything happens," he added.

Tens of thousands of Hindus visit the cave, located 15,000 feet (4,545 metres) above sea

level, each year to offer prayers at what they believe is the abode of Shiva, the Hindu God of destruction.

The statement said Muslims would be barred at any cost from going to Mecca next year by Sena activists if the Amarnath pilgrimage was blocked.

The western port city is the most popular departure point for Indian pilgrims, thousands of whom travel by sea.

The former cartoonist's followers have been blamed for attacks on Muslims in Bombay during communal riots following the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu zealots on December 6, 1992.

Nearly 1,000 people died and property worth millions of dollars destroyed in the riots after which Thackeray was reported as boasting that his organisation had taught Muslims "a lesson."

All India Hajj Committee chief Rizwan Harris declined comment on the threat.

Off the Record

Rats are more effective than guns

DUBLIN: Forget guns, Irish robbers have found rats are a more effective weapon to frighten people into abandoning cars and possessions, police said on Monday, reports Reuter.

Dublin police said robbers toss rodents into an open window or sun roof and wait for their terrified victims — usually women — to flee.

The ladies approach traffic lights and when stopped they come and throw the rats in, a police spokesman said. "Usually the lady jumps out and then steals the car or takes the victim's possessions at leisure."

The spokesman said they were advising victims to take their chances with the rats.

"We decided the lady would be safer staying in her car with the rats — otherwise she would be meeting up with two-legged rats," he said.

Andrew is my best friend, says Fergie

SYDNEY: Britain's Duchess of York says she is "best friends" with her estranged husband, Prince Andrew, and refuses to say whether she is considering divorce, reports AP.

In a copyright interview by Press Impact Italia, published in "Woman's Day" magazine in Australia Monday, the Duchess denied reports that she was writing a book which could embarrass her mother-in-law, Queen Elizabeth II.

The Duchess, who separated from Andrew in March 1992, said they share a "deep affection."

"We really are best friends," she said. "Thanks to our affection and our joint efforts, and thanks also to Andrew's intelligence, sensibility and sense of responsibility as a father, our children never suffered any trauma of separation."

The six-page article said the Duchess, better known in the media by her nickname, Fergie, refused to say whether she would eventually divorce the prince.

She denied a media report that she planned to sell her memoirs to a US publisher for 25 million dollars.

"...I'll never write them," the Duchess said. "I care so much for my mother-in-law the Queen. She is a wonderful woman. I respect and admire her, and I love her very much."

She said she still enjoyed a strong link with the royal family but admitted "there is strain and stress." She shares a lot with Diana, the Princess of Wales, who is separated from Prince Charles.

The Duchess said "people around the royal family" had subjected her to pressure. "I think that with a little less hostility and a little more support, things could have been made easier, less difficult and traumatic," she said.

Sex may tackle headache as an aspirin!

LONDON: A headache is no reason for rebuffing a partner's amorous overtures, a British expert said on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

In fact, sex may tackle the pain as effectively as an aspirin, Kaye Wellings of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine wrote in the magazine *Which Way to Health*.

Wellings, director of the school's sexual health programme, said endorphin hormones produced during intercourse have a pain-killing effect as well as producing a feeling of well-being.

The combination of sex and pleasure makes sex a great way to beat stress and its damaging effects on the heart, circulation and immune systems, she said.

Lanka invites 46 foreigners to observe polls

COLOMBO, Aug 9: At least 46 foreigners have been invited to observe Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections next week, the elections commissioner Chandrananda De Silva announced today, reports AFP.

The observers will include prominent figures from Australia, Bangladesh, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, and the United States, he said in a statement.

The observers will be available to receive representations from political parties and independent groups,