

BRIEFLY

Lankan defence secy resigns: Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary General Wanasinghe on Saturday tendered his resignation ending weeks of speculation about his premature retirement, official sources said. AFP reports from Colombo.

Wanasinghe had an unscheduled meeting with President Chandrika Kumaratunga at which he declared his intention to quit, an official source said adding that the resignation was accepted with effect from Friday.

2 die in Sumatra chopper crash: An Indonesian air charter firm helicopter crashed in the northern Sumatra province of Aceh, killing two people and severely injuring another, a search and rescue official said yesterday. AFP reports from Jakarta.

A Pelita Air Service NBO-150 helicopter, with a pilot, a mechanic and a loadmaster on board, crashed on Saturday in jungle near its destination in Pidie regency, killing the loadmaster instantly, the official said.

Blasts kill 2 in Philippines: Two people were killed and 16 others injured when an unidentified attacker hurled two grenades at crowd of shoppers in a Manila public market early Sunday, police said. Reuter reports from Manila.

The grenade thrower escaped in the stampede after the two blasts at the Kalookan district market ripped through the vegetable and fish stalls.

Iran starts building tanks: Iran has started building its own battle tanks and amphibious armoured personnel carriers, the official Iranian news agency Irna reported Saturday. AFP reports from Tehran.

Irna said the tank was an improved version of Russian-made tanks seized by Iranian forces during the 1980-1988 war with Iraq. It did not specify which model the Iranian tank was based on.

43 die of cholera in Angola: At least 43 persons died of cholera in the last two days in the town of Cubal, Benguela province, the head of the provincial Department for Hygiene and Epidemiology Samandalo told Angop news agency on Friday. POOL reports from Cubal, Angola.

Shmandalo who spent the past 20 days in Cubal to follow the development of the situation said since the breakout of the epidemic in January 789 cases of cholera have been registered.

US Commerce Secy begins ME tour: US Commerce Secretary Ronald H Brown opened a Middle East tour Sunday with a visit to President Hosni Mubarak to thank him for his role in the peace process, AP reports from Cairo.

Brown, who hopes to aid peace prospects by encouraging economic development in the region, will make stops in Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar before leaving for Washington on Friday.

On Wednesday, he will attend a meeting of trade officials from Israel, Jordan and Egypt in the Egyptian resort of Taba, near the Israeli border.

US novelist Highsmith dies: American mystery novelist Patricia Highsmith died on Saturday in hospital in Locarno, Switzerland, French television said. Reuter reports from Paris.

Highsmith, born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1921, wrote a string of highly acclaimed suspense novels starting with "Strangers on a Train" (1950), later filmed by Alfred Hitchcock with stars Robert Walker and Farley Granger.

Rebels kill 2 in Sierra Leone: At least two people were killed and six others wounded yesterday during a rebel attack on a bus in Bo, capital of southern province, Sierra Leone, Xinhua reports from Freetown.

According to Sierra Leone Defence Department officials, this is the first rebel ambush in that area.

Pro-Kurdish newspaper closed: A pro-Kurdish newspaper closed after a court ruling sanctioned a government crackdown that included confiscation of every issue, the daily's editor said on Saturday. AP reports from Ankara.

Baki Karadeniz said directors of Ozgur Ulke, or Free Country, decided to cease publication on Friday. A day earlier, a court decided the Istanbul-based paper had made no charges since being banned last year on allegations of making Kurdish propaganda.

Algeria recalls envoy to Paris: Algeria's ambassador to France was recalled Saturday for consultations following a French proposal for a European conference on the bloody crisis between Islamic extremists and military-backed rulers of this North African nation, AP reports from Algiers.

Egyptian cop shot dead: Suspected Muslim militants shot dead a policeman and wounded five others in an attack on a police rest-house in southern Egypt yesterday, police said. Reuter reports from Assiut, Egypt.

A sixth person, a civilian bystander, was also wounded in the shoot-out that followed civilians in the area said shooting continued for several minutes after the attack.

Polls held in Kyrgyzstan: In a region where democracy has had trouble taking root since the 1991 Soviet collapse, the Central Asian nation of Kyrgyzstan held elections Sunday for its first post-independence parliament, AP reports from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan's earlier parliament was dissolved unconstitutionally last fall in a government crisis.

Omani, Israeli FM's meet in Jordan: The Omani and Israeli foreign ministers met over the weekend in Jordan to discuss normalising ties between the two countries, reports AP from Amman.

Oman's Yousef Ben Alawi and Shimon Peres of Israel held talks Saturday in the Red Sea resort of Aqaba, 350 kilometers (210 miles) south of Amman, according to the diplomats, who spoke Sunday on condition of anonymity. The Omani Embassy confirmed the meeting, but declined to give details.

GIA claims responsibility for blast: The radical Algerian Islamic armed group (GIA) has claimed responsibility for a deadly suicide bomb attack in central Algiers last month and pledged more operations in February, Al-Hayat newspaper reported today, says AFP from Beirut.

There will be no let up, the month of Ramadan is the month of death and fighting and victories. All the mujahideens must step up military operations, including suicide attacks, a GIA statement published by Al-Hayat said.

Iran rejects US report on HR

TEHRAN, Feb 5: Iran has rejected a US report on human rights status in other countries, saying that Washington itself is a violator of human rights, reports Xinhua.

The United States has violated human rights and therefore its report on human rights in other countries is not to be considered valid, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Mahmoud Mohammadi said Saturday.

The report prepared by the US State Department praised improvement of human rights in Israel and Haiti and as usual accused Iran and a host of other countries of human rights violations.

Pakistanis observe strike in support of Kashmiris

ISLAMABAD, Feb 5: Life came to a grinding halt in major Pakistani cities and towns today as the nation observed a general strike to express solidarity with the Indian-held state's independence movement, reports AFP.

Shops, markets and business centres were closed and public and private transport remained off road, witnesses said.

Schools, colleges and universities and offices were also shut down as the government had already declared it a holiday.

A protest rally was held in Islamabad and was due to move onto nearby Rawalpindi later in the afternoon after a memorandum had been handed to the Indian consulate.

Port activity came to a standstill in southern Karachi where all business houses and industrial units were closed. The strike also paralysed life in nearby Rawalpindi. Reports from other places also speak of an almost complete shutdown as rival political parties cooperated to make the strike a success.

The call was given by the government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to condemn the Indian "atrocities" in the northern Himalayan state where more than 10,000 people have been killed in the five-year-old insurgency.

In a televised address to the nation on the eve of the strike Bhutto said "the people of Kashmir desire to join Pakistan and India is pursuing a policy of keeping them in shackles by bayonets".

But, linking peace in the

subcontinent with the solution of a nearly 5-year-old dispute, she emphasised that only the 1949 United Nations resolutions, which called for a referendum in Kashmir, could form the basis for a settlement.

She urged India to shun the "policy of oppression and aggression and give serious thought to coming to the negotiating table to decide on the modalities of a plebiscite."

This is the only option available with India, she said making it clear that Kashmiris were up in arms and were not prepared to accept the "Indian

yeke."

Another report says: More than 10,000 activists of India's ruling Congress (I) party marched to the Pakistani border Sunday to protest a strike called by Islamabad expressing solidarity with the Muslim separatists.

Demonstrators from the Congress youth chapter marched along a six-kilometre frontier stretch, they burned copies of the Pakistani constitution and effigies of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, witnesses said.

They shouted "down with

Pakistan," and "down with terrorism," and torched Pakistani flags to protest what they termed "direct interference in the internal matters of India."

Indian border guards stopped marchers crossing into Pakistani territory from the frontier village of Chamlihal, 40 kilometres from the Kashmir winter capital Jammu, witnesses said.

Addressing the marchers, Raman Bhalla, head of the state's Youth Congress, appealed to the United Nations to stop Islamabad encouraging militancy in the state.

— AFP photo



Activists of different political parties shout anti-Indian slogans in front of the Indian consulate in Islamabad on Sunday. All the political and religious parties including Pakistan held Kashmiri groups supported the government sponsored strike throughout the country expressing solidarity with the people of Indian held Kashmir. — AFP photo

Sinn Fein warns Major not to dilute peace plan

BELFAST, Feb 5: The president of the IRA's political wing, Sinn Fein, warned British Prime Minister John Major today not to dilute a Northern Ireland peace plan to ensure his own political survival, reports Reuter.

Gerry Adams, head of the Irish Republican Army, said there was a risk the embattled British premier might seek to water down terms of an Anglo-Irish peace plan to placate protestant unionists on whose votes the government is heavily dependent.

He issued his statement at the end of a turbulent week in which unionist legislators warned Major that they would bring down his minority government if the peace plan

threatened their cherished British status.

Major was forced to address the nation to calm their fears after a newspaper leak said the plan envisaged cross-border bodies which would bring Northern Ireland much closer to reunification with Ireland.

"There is a grave danger at this time that John Major may attempt to placate the unionists while paying lip service to the need for change," Adams said.

"His concern is to survive as British prime minister and to lead his party into government, even a coalition one, after the next election."

Karens set up new HQ inside Myanmar

BANGKOK, Feb 5: Myanmar's Karen National Union (KNU) guerrilla group has set up a new headquarters inside Myanmar after the capture by Myanmar government forces of its former headquarters at Manerplaw late last month, a KNU official said today, reports Reuter.

"Most of our leaders are already there," guerrilla official Arthur Shwe said of the new base though he declined to reveal its location for security reasons.

"May be it will be only a temporary headquarters, a mobile headquarters. It might move," he told a small group of reporters.

Manerplaw, on the Thai-Myanmar border 200 km (120 miles) northeast of Yangon,

was seized by Myanmar government forces on January 27.

Karen leaders including guerrilla commander general Bo Mya, as well as some 6,000 civilian supporters, were forced to take refuge in Thailand after the base fell.

Manerplaw was also the headquarters of pro-democracy dissidents and student guerrillas who fled to the Karen zone following a 1988 crackdown on democracy demonstrations in Yangon and other cities and towns.

Shwe said he expected the Karens' partners in the opposition alliance to join them at their new headquarters soon.

Shwe reiterated that the KNU was always ready to talk peace with the ruling military body in Yangon.

Syria dismisses Israeli call to curb Palestinian radical groups

DAMASCUS, Feb 5: Syria on Saturday dismissed Israeli calls to curb radical Palestinian groups, saying Arabs have the right to resist Israel until they liberate their occupied lands, reports Reuter.

The official newspaper Tishreen said Damascus will continue to back the Middle East peace process but added that peace could be made only when Israel withdrew from the occupied Arab lands.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said on Friday PLO chief Yasser Arafat joined in his demand, during a summit meeting in Cairo on Thursday, that Syria stop providing a haven for an alliance of 10 Palestinian groups opposed to the Israel-PLO peace deal.

Tishreen said: "Peace could not be built in the air. It has its basic elements which call for the implementation of (United Nations) Security Council resolutions, Israel's withdrawal from all the Arab lands and ensuring self-determination for the Palestinian people."

"If this is not achieved, then Arabs have a right to con-

front the organised Israeli terrorism and to resist occupation like all peoples of the world."

The newspaper accused Israel of being a "centre for organised terrorism in the region" and said the West was "colluding and forgiving Israel for its criminal acts."

In Israel, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres told Israel radio's English news on Saturday: "It's a scandal. The scandal is Damascus is the headquarters of all the leaders of the refusal camp that also use arms."

Asked if Israel expected Egypt to put pressure on Syria, he said: "Cairo doesn't press. Cairo can lead and we shall surely appreciate the leading role by Egypt. We see the Egyptians as the leader of the peace process in the Middle East."

Rabin told Israel television on Friday that Arafat expressed fears during the Cairo summit meeting, in which Jordan's King Hussein and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak were present, that his life was being

threatened by the Syrian-based groups.

Members of the radical Palestinian alliance, mainly the Islamic Jihad and Hamas, have killed scores of Israelis since the Jewish state gave limited self-rule to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho in May.

The groups have vowed to undermine the deal which they say has harmed the Palestinians and given Israel all it wanted.

Syria opened peace negotiations with Israel in 1991, but the talks have stalled over

12 more killed in Karachi violence

KARACHI, Pakistan, Feb 5: At least 12 people were killed and 11 wounded in fresh sectarian and factional violence in Karachi in the past 24 hours, police officials said, reports Reuter.

Tension between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims has mounted with the start of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan this week.

withdrawal from the Golan heights seized by Israel in 1967, future ties and security arrangements.

Tishreen said support to Palestinian and Lebanese resistance movements would continue.

"Because Syria supports the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples' struggle and because it calls for a just and comprehensive peace which would end occupation, it is hosting terrorists in Israel's view," Tishreen said.

The paper said military attacks which Israel portrayed as terrorist actions were acts of resistance.

"If we review Israel's practices since it was established we will see a big record of terrorist actions."

"These actions include massacres, destruction of villages and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Lebanese and Syrian people and the repression of two million Palestinians in their camps after it expelled them from their homes," Tishreen said.

Nepal wants to promote ties with India

KATHMANDU, Feb 5: Nepali Deputy Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal said that the time has come for further enhancing the bonds of mutual friendship between Nepal and India, reports Xinhua.

The deputy prime minister, together with the Nepali foreign minister and defence minister, made this statement in an interview with "The Kathmandu Post" on Saturday, two days before he leaves for India for a five-day official visit at the invitation of the Indian Minister of External Affairs Dinesh Singh.

The time has come to carve out a framework that will further strengthen the age-old ties between Nepal and India as the world is on the threshold of the 21st century, said the deputy prime minister.

The deputy prime minister will leave for India on February 6.



The crew of the space shuttle Discovery (Front) Russian Astronaut Vladimir Titov (L), Bernard Harris (C), Pilot Eileen Collins (R), (Back) British Astronaut Michael Foale (L), Commander James Wetherbee (C) and Janice Voss (R) hold a press conference last Saturday from Discovery's flight deck. The shuttle with international crew will fly-around the Russian space station MIR during its scheduled eight-day mission in space. — AFP photo

BJP trading in Hindu revivalism to bag votes in state polls

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: India's main opposition party is trading in Hindu revivalism for populism in a bid to bounce back onto political centre-stage in crucial state elections which begin next week, reports AFP.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian people's party) is offering plenty of promises to the poor ahead of the staggered ballot, which is also seen as vital to the Congress (I) Party of Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao.

The Hindu-nationalist BJP, the largest opposition group in parliament, was widely seen as the party waiting to take power in New Delhi until its

ambitions were punctured by a stinging defeat in November 1993 state elections.

The BJP has been in limbo since then, in state elections in November of last year in southern India, the party fared poorly, although it won 40 seats in the state of Karnataka for its biggest triumph in the region.

The BJP, naturally, is placing its hopes on the upcoming elections in six states in February and March, particularly on the western coastal states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, both now ruled by the Congress.

Maharashtra, which includes Bombay, will go to the

hustings February 9 and 12, heralding the month-long state ballot which has the potential to make or break the embattled Rao's three-year-old government.

"These are very important elections for us because they will decide the future polarisation of political forces in the country," said BJP spokesman Krishan Lal Sharma. "We think the BJP will gain immensely."

Analysts say the BJP has a fair chance of seizing power in Gujarat for the first time, and that the party and its militant Hindu ally, the Shiv Sena, are neck-and-neck with the Congress in adjoining Maharashtra.

The BJP has turned to populism to bag votes in the two states following the dwindling appeal of Hindu revivalism following the 1992 razing of a mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya that sparked bloody Hindu-Muslim violence.

It is promising wheat at two rupees (seven cents) a kilogramme to the poor in Gujarat, taking a cue from a similar offer of rice that helped a regional party crush the Congress in Rao's home state of Andhra Pradesh in December.

In Maharashtra, India's industrial hub, the BJP and Shiv Sena have vowed to provide meals made of local cereal to

the poor for just one rupee (3.50 cents) and free housing to tens of thousands of homeless in Bombay.

Until November 1993, the BJP's sole plank was a promise to build a multi-million-dollar Hindu temple on the rubble of the 16th-century mosque that was razed by Hindu zealots in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992.

It was part of a campaign which helped the party boost its strength in the federal parliament from just two seats in 1984 to 89 in 1989 to a record 119 two years later.

The emotive issue also propelled the BJP to power in four states in 1991. All four BJP state governments were

dismissed by New Delhi after the mosque razing, necessitating the November 1993 polls in which the BJP was mauled.

"Maharashtra and Gujarat are very important for us," said another BJP leader. "If we do not capture power in at least one state, our plans of seizing power in New Delhi will remain just a dream."

Sharma said a victory was also necessary if the BJP was to emerge as the national alternative to the Congress in parliamentary elections due in mid-1996 instead of a rival centrist leftist coalition.

It is important for us to average November 1993," Sharma added.

Vietnam may join ASEAN in July

MANILA, Feb 5: Vietnam is expected to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in July this year as a full member, Philippine Foreign Secretary Roberto Romulo said today, reports Reuter.

"That will happen in July before the ASEAN ministerial meeting (in Brunei)," Romulo told a news conference at the end of a three-day conference in Manila of the Philippines-Vietnam joint commission for bilateral cooperation.

Romulo, sitting beside Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam, said senior officials of the ASEAN nations had agreed on Vietnam's entry to ASEAN as a full member this year.

Teen held for spiking teacher's coffee with chemicals

SAN JOSE, California: A 13-year-old boy is accused of spiking his science teacher's coffee with a mix of chemicals the teacher had warned could kill with a single drop, reports AP.

Another student at Ida Price Middle School told the teacher not to drink the coffee just as she was about to sip it, police said on Friday.

Patrice Stable told the class a few months ago that the mixture, Benedict's solution, was potent enough to kill a person with one drop, police said. Poison control officials said the chemical is not fatal, but could make a person sick.

The solution, which contains copper sulfate and potassium, is used to detect sugars in science experiments.

The student spiked the coffee when Stable left the room briefly on Wednesday, police officer Louis Quezda said.

The boy is being held in a juvenile detention center, charged with assault with a deadly weapon. School and law enforcement officials were trying to determine a motive.

"The student has nothing personal with the teacher and has never been suspended," superintendent Barry Groves said. "It's very confusing."