

OIC supports UN peace efforts in Afghanistan

JEDDAH, Feb 16: The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) on Wednesday called for an immediate halt to fighting in Afghanistan and backed UN efforts to bring peace to the war-torn country, reports AFP.

Hamid Algabid, OIC secretary general, expressed "support to the ongoing efforts of the United Nations for peace in Afghanistan," in a statement issued from the organisation's headquarters in this Red Sea city.

Algabid urged an "immediate cessation of all armed hostilities, emplacement of verifiable ceasefire arrangements, and disengagement of forces especially from Kabul and its vicinity."

He also called on the Afghan leadership, parties and people to cooperate fully with the UN special mission in facilitating the convening of the Afghan Transitional Council leading to the establishment of a new interim government in Afghanistan.

The United Nations says Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani will transfer power to a new governing body under UN supervision from February 20.

The OIC which groups 51 Muslim countries has made several appeals for a ceasefire in Afghanistan during the holy fasting month of Ramadan.

Yeltsin blames commanders for 'big losses' in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Feb 16: President Boris Yeltsin on Thursday defended his decision to send Russian soldiers to war in Chechnya, but blamed his military leaders for the "big losses" and "human rights violations" in the southern republic, reports AP.

Yeltsin, in his annual state of the nation address to a joint session of parliament, invited lawmakers to observe a moment of silence for the victims of the fighting. Members of the State Duma and the Federation Council then stood in the Kremlin's Marble Hall.

Yeltsin looked confident as he strode to the microphone to deliver his 61-minute speech. He read from a prepared text, and rarely looked up at the lawmakers. At one point, he paused, apparently losing his place.

It was Yeltsin's first major address since he sent 40,000 soldiers into Chechnya on Dec 11 to force the republic to renounce its self-proclaimed independence.

Since the war began, Yeltsin's popularity has plummeted to an all-time low, and some lawmakers have urged the president to resign before his term expires in 1996.



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Yeltsin said the crisis in Chechnya had demonstrated the need to reorganize the Russian military.

"We must admit that at present the armed forces are not prepared to resolve the local conflicts," he said.

In the initial stage, the hackneyed system of planning military operations of such a scope, uncoordinated activities of the ministries made themselves felt. This is the main reason for the big losses. This is the root of the human rights violations in the course of combat activities."

It was Yeltsin's sharpest criticism yet of his military commanders. There have been persistent reports that Yeltsin plans to oust Defense Minister Pavel Grachev or other top officials involved in planning the Chechnya offensive.

Yeltsin previously had delayed his annual address twice, apparently waiting until his

soldiers gained the upper hand in Chechnya.

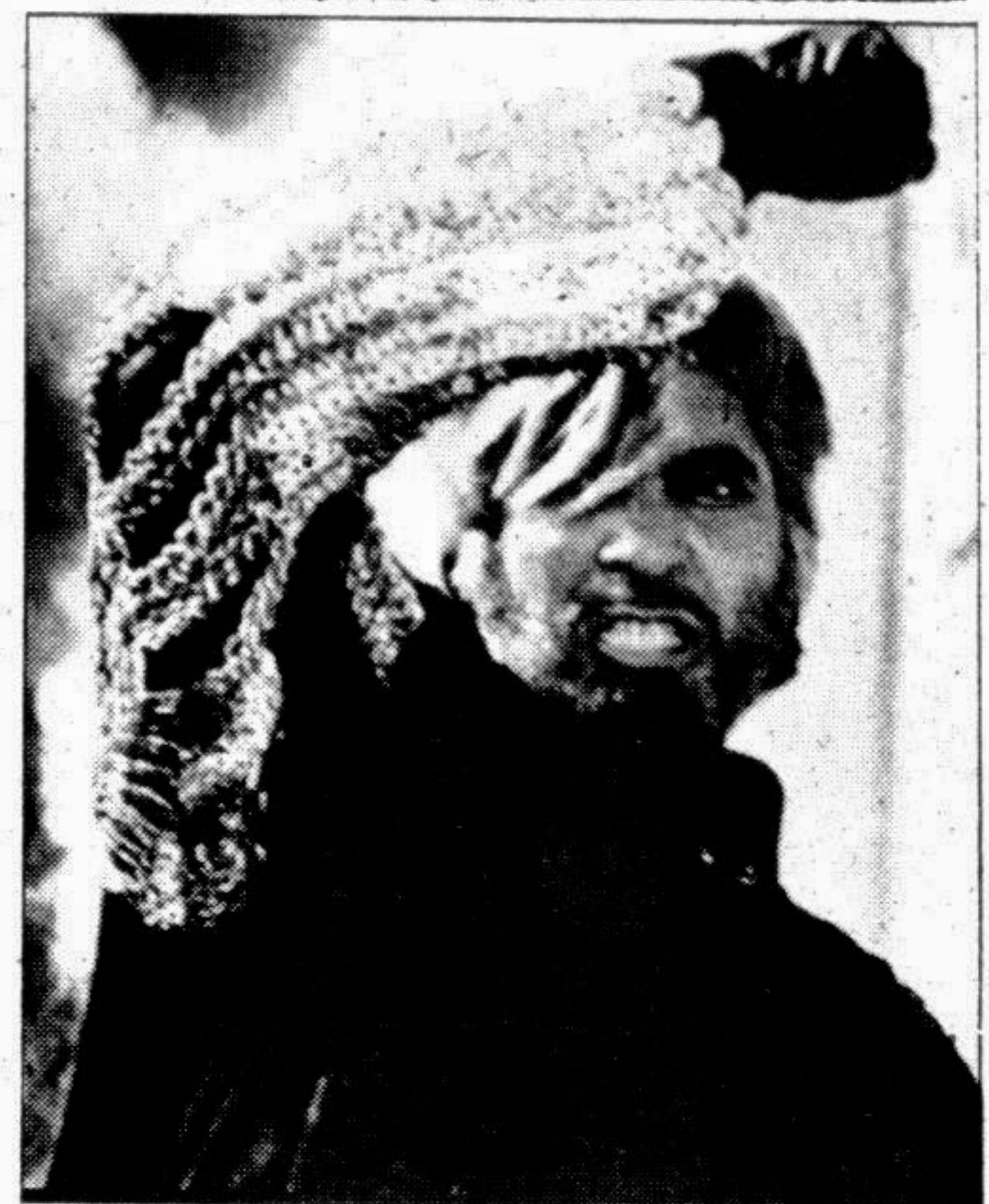
"Dear deputies, Russia is living in a difficult time when we need decisive - sometimes tough - measures to normalize life in the country," he said.

Yeltsin praised the troops now serving in Chechnya, but criticized those who lead them.

"Russian soldiers show the best qualities that a military person can have," he said. "(But) the reform of the armed forces has been too slow. This year we must take decisive measures to reorganize the armed forces... We must improve their funding, their training, the coordination of all actions to ensure law and order and defense capabilities of the country."

Yeltsin also urged parliament to strengthen Russia's judiciary, which as largely escaped reforms over the past three years.

Off the Record



Undated file picture of Indian movie superstar Amitabh Bachchan, who has floated a company to cash in on his brand value in a pioneering concept, shows him pictured in an action sequence from the film Shahenshah in which he played a vigilante. Bachchan is acknowledged as India's most successful film star ever. —AFP photo

Marriage course before marriage

KUALA LUMPUR: Muslim couples who wish to enter matrimony may soon be asked to take a compulsory basic course in marriage, according to a government plan reported Thursday, says AP.

At the end of the two-week classroom session, couples will be required to take an evaluation test to be eligible for marriage, the Star newspaper reported.

We will conduct an in-depth study before making a final decision on the matter," Abdul Hamid Othman, deputy minister in the prime minister's office, was quoted as saying by the Star.

The course is aimed at safeguarding the family institution, the Star said.

A voluntary course on the same lines was started 3 years ago, which Hamid said won good response. "We feel that by making the course compulsory, it will not be a burden to Muslims," he said.

At present, the volunteer courses are conducted by state religious departments and applicants have to take an evaluation test before they can marry.

About 55 per cent of Malaysia's 19 million people are Muslims. The official religion of the country is Islam, but other ethnic minorities such as Chinese and Indians are free to practice their religions.

'Because I am the most beautiful ...'

TAIPEI: A Taiwanese woman killed her mother-in-law and stabbed her mother because she thought her own beauty made other women unnecessary, a prosecutor said Wednesday, reports AP.

Hu Pao-yin, 35, told a district court she knifed her mother-in-law on Christmas Eve "because I am the most beautiful woman in the world and the existence of other women is unnecessary," prosecutor Chou Hui-lien said in an interview.

The mother-in-law, Wen Chang Ho-mei, was rushed to a hospital with a knife wound in the back and died that evening, said Chou, a prosecutor for the Hsinchu District Court in northern Taiwan.

A day earlier, Hu had also stabbed her adoptive mother in the back, Chou said. Neighbors rushed Hu Yueh-tzu to a hospital and she survived.

The younger Hu pleaded guilty to murder and attempted murder to police, Chou said.

The court on Tuesday recommended a death sentence or life imprisonment for Hu, saying she does not have a record of mental disorder and expressed no regret for her crimes, Chou said.

A sentencing date will be fixed soon, Chou said. He refused to comment on Hu's looks.

PAS activities contrary to religion: Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 16: Signaling the start of election sabre-rattling, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has accused a main opposition Islamic party of misusing religion for votes, reports AP.

His speech to party cadres late Wednesday was entirely devoted to condemning Parti Islam SeMalaya, or PAS, which wants to turn Malaysia into an Islamic state.

"I want to make it clear that PAS does not struggle for Islam, but strives for political gains," Mahathir said. "To get places in politics, they are prepared to do things contrary to religion," he said.

Mahathir must call national elections before December, but local news reports have said they are likely to be held in April after the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.



Although Malaysia's official religion is Islam, Malaysia gives other religions equal rights.

The Federal Investigation Agency has grabbed relevant documents on the recommendation of the Federal Anti-Corruption Committee, according to Wasi.

Crackdown on asylum seekers in UK

LONDON, Feb 16: Home Secretary Michael Howard on Wednesday announced a crackdown on asylum seekers with a package of measures designed to speed up the expulsion of bogus applicants, reports AP.

He said the measures, affecting an estimated 13,000 asylum seekers each year would save Britain 100 million pounds (150 million dollars) in social security payments over the next three years.

Immigrants welfare organizations accused Howard of a "knee jerk reaction" to a row over European Union plans to relax border controls.

But Home Office sources insisted the two matters were unrelated and that the measures were necessary to deal with the 56,000 strong backlog of outstanding cases that had built up — an increase of 10,000 since 1993.

Announcing the measures in two House of Commons written answers Howard said "we will save time in deciding on genuine cases and taxpayers money will not be wasted by delays in dealing with bogus claims."

The government is spending an extra 37 million pounds (55.5 million dollars) over the next three years in what Howard described as a significant reinforcement of the system for determining asylum applications, it would mean an additional 7,000 claims could be processed each year.

There is also to be a radical extension of the use of curtailment powers contained within the 1993 asylum and immigration appeals act which will effectively and the right of some claimants to a second appeal.

The Home Office estimates

it will affect an additional 6,000 asylum seekers each year who make their claim after arriving in Britain and before their temporary leave to stay has expired.

Last weekend Junior Trade and Industry Minister Charles Wardle resigned over what he termed the EU's policy of "uncontrolled immigration."

On Tuesday, Prime Minister John Major pledged to fight to retain Britain's immigration and border controls, despite EU plans announced on Wednesday to ban all such checks under the terms of the Maastricht Treaty.

The director of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, Claude Moraes said Howard's new measures removed an essential safeguard from what was already a "fast track" appeals process.

This is a knee-jerk reac-

tion. The idea is, because of the Wardle resignation, he has to look tough on immigration quickly. He is paring down the asylum system to the very minimum. It will result in more refusals," he said.

According to the Home Office around 80 per cent of asylum applications — now running at 30,000 a year — are rejected by immigration officials for failing to meet established United Nations criteria. The vast majority of rejections are upheld on appeal.

Five per cent are granted refugee status while 15 per cent are granted exceptional leave to stay on compassionate grounds.

The main applicant nationalists last year were Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Ghana, most of those who received asylum were from Iraq, Iran and Turkey.

PLO, S Africa set up ties

CAPETOWN, Feb 16: South Africa and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) announced on Wednesday the establishment of full diplomatic ties between the two sides, reports AP.

But South African Foreign Minister Alfred Nzo, who made the announcement during a joint press conference with his PLO counterpart Farouk Kaddoumi, stressed that the normalisation of relations with the autonomous Palestinian territories would not affect South Africa's relationship with Israel.

"The formalisation of our relationship with Palestine does not in any way affect our relationship with Israel or our support for their right to live within secure borders," Nzo said.

He added that South Africa was committed to the Middle East peace process.

Chandrika seeks LTTE's help to resolve crisis

COLOMBO, Feb 16: President Chandrika Kumaratunga appealed to Tamil Tiger rebels on Thursday to give up the bitterness of the past and co-operate in resolving the 11-year ethnic conflict, reports AP.

Her comments reflected a steadily deepening frustration with the slow progress of negotiations since launching a peace initiative immediately after her government was elected last August.

"I very sincerely request the people of the north, including the Tigers, to help us in this peace process... turn a new leaf so that we can achieve peace," the president said in an interview on the state radio marking her husband's seventh death anniversary.

Mrs Kumaratunga said the negotiations with the rebels had advanced, but "it's going to

be a slow and painful process, quite definitely."

Her husband, Vijaya Kumaratunga, leader of the opposition left-wing Sri Lanka Peoples' Party, was gunned down by a radical Sinhalese group that was trying to overthrow the government in 1988. He favoured negotiations with the rebels and himself met with Velupillai Prabhakaran, the Tiger leader.

Mrs Kumaratunga repeated her accusation that the rebels were stalling political discussions on a permanent solution to the problem.

"They are willing to talk about anything else so that they can have a ceasefire, fishing rights and reconstruction packages. But they are not willing to talk about peace for the moment; the final peace," she said.



A woman holds a club, stands with other Ruyterwacht residents on Wednesday at a schoolgate to protest the presence of black students in the school. Residents of this predominantly white suburb of Cape Town have attempted to bar the students from entering the school. — AFP photo

'Contact group' launches fresh move to end crisis in Bosnia

SARAJEVO, Feb 16: Big power mediators launched a fresh initiative to resolve the conflicts in former Yugoslavia under which Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, whom they one branded a pariah, would hold the key to peace in the Balkans, reports Reuter.

Throwing his weight behind other allies, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher said the new effort to put pressure on the Bosnian Serbs could bring peace to Bosnia if Milosevic agreed to it.

But Christopher, testifying before a Senate committee, said it was far from certain that Milosevic would accept the proposals which diplomats

said would force him to renounce his long cherished dreams of a so-called greater Serbia.

The West blamed Milosevic at the onset of the Bosnian civil war almost three years ago for fanning nationalist sentiment which promoted Bosnian Serbs to refuse to join the republic's Muslims and Croats in their drive for independence.

Former US secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger described him as a war criminal.

But the collapse of countless peace initiatives, conferences and mediating efforts

worst the West, facing the prospect of a major crisis in Europe since World War Two, to try to bury the past and turn to Milosevic for help.

A five-nation "contact group" comprising Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States still hopes to persuade the Bosnian Serbs to accept a peace plan dividing Bosnia almost equally between them and a Muslim-Croat federation.

Milosevic, under pressure from UN sanctions, backed the plan as a "fair deal" and warned the Bosnian Serbs before cutting them off last August not to "squander away their winnings like a drunken poker

player."

Appealing to Serbian nationalists, the Bosnian Serbs in turn accused him of selling out the dream of greater Serbia and they again rejected the plan this week.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said the contact group initiative was a last chance to prevent a new explosion of fighting in Bosnia and Croatia, with the danger that a withdrawal of UN troops could spark a wider Balkan war.

Christopher confirmed publicly what US officials said in background briefings on Tuesday — that the contact group would now offer a tem-

porary suspension of UN sanctions on Serbia if Milosevic would recognise Bosnia and Croatia.

He said the suspension would last two months and would not be renewed unless Milosevic carried out his side of the bargain. A second requirement was that Serbia must seal its border with rebel Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia more effectively, he said.

Christopher said the initiative was a "difficult course" in view of Milosevic's past record of support for fellow Serbs in former Yugoslav republics. Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic whose forces

control 70 per cent of the country after 36 months of war, is now rapidly toughening his stance.

In a speech on Monday in Bosnian Serb parliament, where he fended off an attempt by a pro-Milosevic minority to have him reconsider the rejection of the peace plan, Karadzic said his goal was nothing short of a sovereign state.

Addressing a rally in northern Bosnian town of Grahovo on Wednesday, Karadzic slammed the contact group as a "bewildered bunch which does not know how to solve the war."

BRIEFLY

Hillary Clinton to visit Lanka: Hillary Clinton, wife of US President Bill Clinton, will visit Sri Lanka in the first week of April. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said yesterday, reports Reuter from Colombo.

Foreign Ministry sources said Hillary Clinton was expected on a day-long visit during a planned South Asian trip. The Sunday Times newspaper reported on February 5 that the US First Lady had told Kadirgamar, who met her during a February 2 meeting with President Clinton in Washington, that she was looking forward to visiting Sri Lanka.

Algerian feminist leader killed: An Algerian feminist leader was murdered on Wednesday in the Berber stronghold of Tizi-Ouzou east of Algiers, her organisation said, AFP reports from Algiers.

Nabila Diahnine, a 35-year-old architect, chaired the organisation Tigri-Net-Netouth (voices of women in the Berber language Tamazight).

Newspaper director Camrose dies: Viscount Camrose, a director of The Telegraph PLC, publishers of the Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph newspapers, died Wednesday after a short illness, a family spokeswoman said. He was 85. AP reports from London.

Camrose died at London's King Edward VII hospital, the spokesman said anonymously.

ICRC opens office in Grozny: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said on Wednesday it had opened an office in the devastated city of Grozny to coordinate relief operations for civilians caught up in the Chechnya conflict, Reuter reports from Geneva.

The Swiss-run humanitarian body said its representatives who had gone to Grozny this week found that two of the city's hospitals had been totally destroyed in the fighting between Russian forces and Chechen separatists.

Fire at Calif abortion clinic: A California abortion clinic was badly damaged early on Wednesday by a fire which the clinic's operators said was arson. Reuter reports from San Luis Obispo, California.

The fire at the Planned Parenthood Clinic in the coastal town of San Luis Obispo, 150 miles (240 km) north of Los Angeles, began in the early morning hours. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) spokesman John Hoos said.

NASA to launch Endeavour Mar 2: NASA has set March 2 as the launch date for an astronomy mission by Endeavour that would be the longest space shuttle flight yet, AP reports from Cape Canaveral.

Endeavour is scheduled to launch at 08:47 AM on the 13 and a half-day flight. It will be the second trip into space for this ultraviolet telescope; the first was in 1990. Four of the seven astronauts assigned to this flight are astronomers or physicists; two of them were on the 1990 mission.

Russian space ferry heads for Mir: A Russian space ferry headed for the Mir orbiting station on Wednesday loaded with gear for the March joint US-Russian mission. AP reports from Moscow.

The Progress M-26 spacecraft blasted off from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan carrying a payload of two metric tons (2.2 tons), the ITAR-Tass news agency said.

Flash floods in Paraguay: Over 15,000 people have been forced to abandon their homes and another 25,000 are likely to follow due to floods caused by the swelling River Paraguay, the government said on Wednesday, Reuter reports from Asuncion.

"We will evaluate next week all the information linked to the flood and we will consider the possibility of declaring a national emergency," Interior Minister Carlos Podesta said.

Ukraine to sell bombers to Russia: Ukraine's air force announced plans on Wednesday to sell off some of its most sophisticated strategic nuclear bombers to Russia, though no deal has yet been reached, Reuter reports from Pryluky, Ukraine.

Air force commander Volodymyr Antonets said Ukraine — which is bound to give up nuclear weapons under international treaties — was strapped for cash and could no longer support its 19 Tupolev Tu-160 bombers.

Cholera claims 5 in Kenya: A cholera outbreak in Kenya's Tharaka Nithi district has killed five people, Dr Kavuo Kilongo in the area has said, Xinhua reports from Nairobi.

Dr Kilongo told the Kenyan news agency on Wednesday that a team of public health officers and medical personnel led by him has been sent to the most-hit divisions of Tharaka north and Tharaka central divisions to contain the situation.

Pak tribal chieftain killed: Gunmen killed a Pakistani tribal chieftain in the southwestern province of Baluchistan on Wednesday, government officials said, Reuter reports from Quetta, Pakistan.

They said Khaitran tribe elder Abdul Karim Khaitran was shot as he left a bank at Barkhan in the northeast of the province, which has a tradition of violent tribal feuds. Two of his bodyguards were critically wounded.

Chiapas rebels ready for talks: Indigenous rebels in the southern state of Chiapas are ready to renew talks with the Mexican government but demand government troops pull out of positions occupied in their most recent advance, a rebel leader said on Wednesday, Reuter reports from Los Altos De Chiapas.

US, UN officials meet Aristide: US and UN officials met with Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide on Wednesday and said the transition to a UN peacekeeping force at the end of March was proceeding smoothly, Reuter reports from Port-Au Prince.

The meeting with Aristide and other Haitian officials was the first in a series of planning sessions for the transition from US-led peacekeeping troops to a 6,900-member UN force on March 31.